



COMBAT

Mediterranean 1942–43

British Paratrooper

VERSUS

Fallschirmjäger

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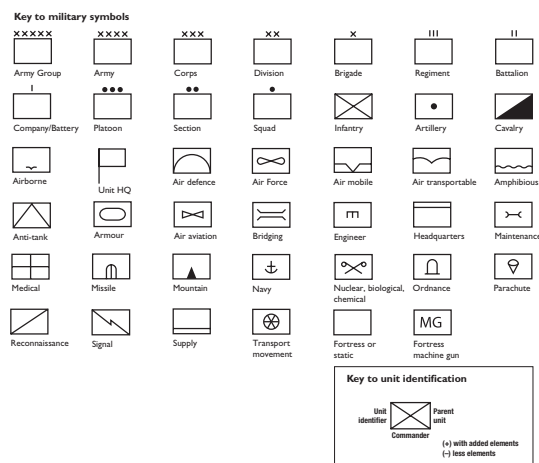
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Editor's note

For ease of comparison please refer to the following conversion table:

1 mile = 1.6km
1yd = 0.9m
1ft = 0.3m
1in = 2.54cm/25.4mm
1lb = 0.45kg

Comparative ranks

British	German
Colonel (Col)	<i>Oberst</i>
Lieutenant-colonel (Lt-Col)	<i>Oberstleutnant</i>
Major (Maj)	<i>Major</i>
Captain (Capt)	<i>Hauptmann</i>
1st lieutenant (1/Lt)	<i>Oberleutnant</i>
2nd lieutenant (2/Lt)	<i>Leutnant</i>
Regimental sergeant-major (RSM)	<i>Hauptfeldwebel</i>
Company sergeant-major (CSM)	<i>Stabsfeldwebel</i>
No equivalent	<i>Oberfeldwebel</i>
Sergeant (Sgt)	<i>Feldwebel</i>
Corporal (Cpl)	<i>Oberjäger</i>
No equivalent	<i>Hauptgefreiter</i>
No equivalent	<i>Obergefreiter</i>
Lance-corporal (L/Cpl)	<i>Gefreiter</i>
Private (Pte)/Sapper (Spr)/Gunner (Gnr)	<i>Jäger/Pionier</i>

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Introduction

In the late afternoon of 14 July 1943 Lt-Col Alastair Pearson, a pre-war Territorial Army officer who had volunteered for special service in 1941, looked up over the reeds on the southern bank of the River Simeto in Sicily and observed German *Fallschirmjäger* preparing for another assault on his small, motley collection of British paratroopers. The previous night the whole of 1st Parachute Brigade had landed by parachute and glider and captured Primosole Bridge, an iron girder structure that spanned the river. Now, no more than a company's worth were available to defend their prize. The presence of *Fallschirmjäger* was unexpected, as during the previous day

Here a tripod-mounted MG 34 provides covering fire for other *Fallschirmjäger* who have just landed. The availability of a belt-fed general-purpose machine gun (which was not available to their British counterparts) that could be set up on a tripod and used in a sustained-fire support role provided the Germans with essential fire support to otherwise lightly armed parachute troops. (Cody Images)





The ability of *Fallschirmjäger* to enter battle soon after landing was crucial to their success. While retrieving their weapons containers could take time, paratroopers had the advantage of surprise, especially at the outset of the invasion of neutral countries in 1940, and once they armed themselves were soon advancing to their objective, often against an unsuspecting enemy. Here *Fallschirmjäger* conduct a tactical assault exercise after landing. Somewhat unusually, an MG 34 mounted on a tripod is being carried forward; such weapons were usually more easily carried into battle dismantled. (Cody Images)

some had been flown into Catania airfield 7 miles to the north and others had parachuted further south. Since mid-morning Hauptmann Franz Stangenberg's improvised force of rear-echelon German paratroopers, using vineyards, orchards and farm buildings as cover and infiltrating through numerous irrigation channels, had been seeking to recapture Primosole Bridge from Pearson's men before tanks and infantry from XIII Corps arrived to relieve the British paratroopers. Having been driven back to the southern bank where cover was sparse, the British were using two concrete blockhouses that guarded access to the bridge to anchor their defence. Ominously, Pearson could see a German self-propelled gun move closer, and steadied his men as the gun pivoted around to face one of the blockhouses.

The unfolding battle for Primosole Bridge would prove to be a key moment for both sides' development of their airborne capability, but at the start of World War II airborne forces had been a new and untried concept. The Soviet Union was at the forefront of their development and in 1935 and 1936 Soviet military manoeuvres were conducted that included 1,000 parachutists and 4,000 airlanded infantry, closely watched by German officers. The idea of vertically enveloping the enemy by landing troops behind enemy lines to seize vital strategic points like airfields and bridges was also a natural accompaniment to German operational method, which envisaged armoured pincers supported by ground-attack aircraft breaking through an enemy line and exploiting rearwards before uniting to surround the enemy in vast pockets.

On 29 January 1936 the first German airborne battalion was established by the Luftwaffe and the Wehrmacht established another by 1 June 1938. In 1939 the units were combined into a regiment and a second was raised; both belonged to 7. Flieger-Division, commanded by Generalmajor Kurt Student, a Luftwaffe officer widely seen as the father of the *Fallschirmjäger*. However, Britain lagged far behind – using concentrations of armoured forces to surround enemy formations was slow in evolving, and consequently the airborne concept did not have the full backing of the military establishment; when the first airborne units were put together, planners intended them to be used for raiding Occupied Europe and supporting special operations.

British and German airborne clashes in North Africa and the Mediterranean, 1942–43

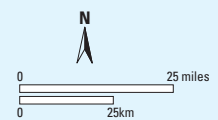
MAP KEY

- 1 12 November 1942:** 1st Parachute Battalion drops at Bône.
- 2 17 November 1942:** 3rd Parachute Battalion drops at Souk-el-Arba.
- 3 29 November 1942:** 2nd Parachute Battalion drops at Depienne.
- 4 2 December 1942:** Elements of 2nd Parachute Battalion and Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 clash at El Fedja ('Cactus Farm').
- 5 5 January 1943:** Elements of 3rd Parachute Battalion and Fallschirm-Pioniere-Bataillon 11 clash at Djebel Azzag ('Green Hill').
- 6 7 May 1943:** British ground forces enter Tunis.
- 7 12 May 1943:** Generaloberst von Arnim surrenders at Ain el Asker. The North African campaign is effectively at an end.
- 8 9/10 July 1943:** 1st Airlanding Brigade lands at Ponte Grande.
- 9 10 July 1943:** Allied forces make amphibious landings in Sicily.
- 10 12 July 1943:** Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 drops south of Primosole Bridge.
- 11 13 July 1943:** Support elements of 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division arrive at Catania.
- 12 13/14 July 1943:** 1st Parachute Brigade drops at Primosole Bridge.
- 13 13/14 July 1943:** No. 3 Commando makes amphibious landing near Malati Bridge.





M e d i t e r r a n e a n S e a



During training in Tunisia a British paratrooper section charges to make final contact with the enemy. In each section, the Bren team would provide covering fire while the rifle group would close in bounds, making a final charge when the enemy was pinned down. (Cody Images)



Not until 1940 would Britain begin to train a battalion in parachute operations; to fulfil the raiding function No. 2 Commando was chosen, and redesignated 11th Special Air Service Battalion on 21 November.

The potential of airborne forces was soon realized with the advent of war. On 9 April 1940 German parachute companies, by landing on airfields in Denmark and Norway, established air bridges for follow-on forces and announced to the world their potential. The allies had been awakened to this new form of warfare but the following month Germany's use of them seemed over-ambitious. On 10 May, 7. Flieger-Division, accompanied by 22. Luftlande-Division (Airlanding Division), struck again in the Netherlands and Belgium; while the storming of the Eben Emael fortress on the River Maas by glider-borne troops was successful, the deployment of airlanding infantry in the Netherlands was less so, and the troops suffered appalling casualties for questionable results. However, despite receiving a head wound Student was undeterred and the following year embraced for his expanded command, now designated XI. Fliegerkorps, the mission to land on Crete on 20 May 1941.

On Crete the German High Command realized the dangers of mounting an airborne landing on an island with no follow-on seaborne invasion to relieve the airborne forces; such an operation would not even be considered by the Allies and, because the airborne landing was such a near-run thing, Germany realized that without near-perfect intelligence this type of operation was asking too much of them. Instead, with the Axis on the back foot, the airborne arm's potential as a strategic reserve seemed a better fit. Some German commanders still advocated the use of paratroopers in mass assaults, but because the inherent dangers of sending lightly armed men with finite supplies behind enemy lines had been starkly shown on Crete, and the prerequisite of all airborne operations – air superiority – was now not always attainable, the German political leadership vetoed such a mission. Instead, only



smaller-scale offensive airborne operations were carried out, albeit still against strategic objectives. In 1942 Student's plan to descend on Malta would be indefinitely postponed.

Meanwhile, with Britain and America seeking to liberate Occupied Europe their interest in airborne forces was gaining momentum. In September 1941 with the intention of taking strategically important objectives such as air bridgeheads, the British formed their first parachute infantry brigade of three battalions, all from volunteers. An airlanding brigade to be trained to use gliders was added the following month, and a second parachute brigade followed in July 1942, fulfilling a divisional complement under Maj-Gen 'Boy' Browning; both these brigades were established for the most part by converting existing infantry battalions. While British airborne recruits had some combat experience by November 1942, very few had seen action as part of an airborne unit. The Germans were in a better position, having available one division plus a second forming (fully operational by May 1943) and, despite the recent horrendous losses on Crete, most units still had a nucleus of veterans.

Theoretically, British notions of airborne forces should have been informed by the successes and mistakes of their adversary, but their first operations in support of ground troops (rather than as raiding forces) in both North Africa and Sicily suggested a certain fascination with potential at the expense of reality. Furthermore, unlike the Germans in their early years, the British airborne units often unexpectedly had to contend with their Axis counterparts being deployed against them. The examination of the three operations that follows illustrates the differences and similarities British and German exponents had towards their use. Because they shared a common bond as military elites at the forefront of military innovation, by looking tactically at the encounters themselves meaningful comparisons between them can also be made.

The British parachute course lasted 14 days and from 1 November 1941 each was run for 250 trainees. After a week's ground training each man did two jumps from an 800ft-high balloon and five from an aircraft. In eight weeks enough parachutists to man two battalions had qualified. Here, airborne soldiers parade in front of a hanger at No. 1 Parachute Training School at Ringway in Lancashire, the current site of Manchester Airport. (Cody Images)

The Opposing Sides

Here German paratroopers land in the Netherlands in May 1940. The web attachments of the German harness can clearly be seen; these left the parachutist hanging face-forwards and unable to reach the straps, so he had little control over the direction in which the parachute took him.

As a consequence, training included forward rolls with kneepads worn (because the British were suspended vertically, they jumped backwards from platforms). For safety reasons recruits needed to weigh less than 82kg (181lb) fully clothed. (Cody Images)

ROLE AND DOCTRINE

In both Germany and Britain, strategic planners debated the type of operation airborne forces could conduct – whether to confine their use as a raiding force against strategic objectives such as bridges and airfields, or deploy them in greater numbers with more ambitious roles in support of the ground offensive or even independently. While the British had the benefit of observing the German experience, salient lessons were not drawn in time to prevent similar mistakes from being made.

German

The Luftwaffe initially believed that airborne troops would be used for small-scale saboteur operations. Rudolf Witzig thought Luftwaffe *Fallschirm-Pioniere* were initially only demolition-mission troops: ‘The parachute troops jumped in, marched to their objective, blew it up, and then tried to return to their own lines’; he believed that Heer doctrine, ‘on the other hand, organized its



parachute units from the beginning for a full range of tactical and strategic missions' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 44). Student concurred and viewed his mission as 'gradually developing the parachute and airborne forces into an instrument of operational import' but dismissed deep raiding because 'the only thing left after conducting the operation was being taken prisoner and perhaps being treated as a saboteur or even a spy' (quoted in McNab 2000: 36). In summer 1938 an airborne artillery unit armed with guns and mortars deployed by parachute in containers was established and by early 1941 four regiments – and a full range of divisional support units – existed.

Early operations in Scandinavia and the Low Countries reflected this strategic vision. By 1942, however, after the disastrous drop on Crete, the *Fallschirmjäger* were used as conventional infantry. Still, two more parachute schools, at Braunschweig in Brandenburg and Salzwedel in Saxony, were opened and in May 1942 a second division was raised. That month Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5, which would serve in Tunisia, began forming at Rheims, France. The regimental Stabs-Kompanie and I. Bataillon were formed from scratch, while II and III. Bataillone of the gliderborne Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment 1 became II and III. Bataillone of the new regiment. (Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment 1 had its origins in the glider-assault battalion that landed in Belgium in 1940; it had been decimated on Crete in 1941.) Another unit that would deploy to Tunisia was Witzig's Fallschirmkorps-Pionier-Bataillon 11, which was based around the old Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 7 that had also dropped on Crete. Despite Student's desire for an offensive role, the Tunisian deployment would instead be the first of many defensive operations for the *Fallschirmjäger*.

In late 1941 Maj-Gen Frederick 'Boy' Browning became Churchill's Airborne advisor. He won the February 1942 Bruneval raid for the Airborne and persuaded Churchill to make 1st Parachute Brigade part of Operation *Torch*. A Grenadier Guardsman and World War I veteran, Browning would take command of I Airborne Corps in 1943 as a lieutenant-general. (Imperial War Museum (IWM) TR 174)

British

In September 1940 the Royal Air Force (RAF) suggested three uses for airborne forces: a raid followed by evacuation by air, a raid followed by evacuation by sea (both predominantly delivered by gliders), and the dropping of parachutists as saboteurs. John Frost, who would become CO 2nd Parachute Battalion, 'carefully studied the German technique' but there was 'difficulty in persuading people that airborne forces could play a really useful part in the war' (Frost 1980: 29) because 'traditional conservatism of many Service chiefs stood in the way of experiment' (Frost 1980: 59). However, in February 1942 Operation *Biting*, Frost's successful raid to capture radar equipment at Bruneval, France, went some way to convincing detractors, and slowly 'we began to realize that we were destined to do far more than land behind enemy lines and carry out raids or act as guerrillas' (Frost 1980: 29).

The established doctrine that expected and assumed parachutists would be 'quick in and quick out' led to light



equipment and supply levels. In North Africa the lack of logistical back-up (aerial resupply was not in place) potentially had disastrous consequences for Frost's 2nd Parachute Battalion. Even the RAF's reluctance to provide sufficient transport aircraft could not stop ambitious parachute operations; the United States Army Air Force stepped in and took over responsibility for their operational delivery.

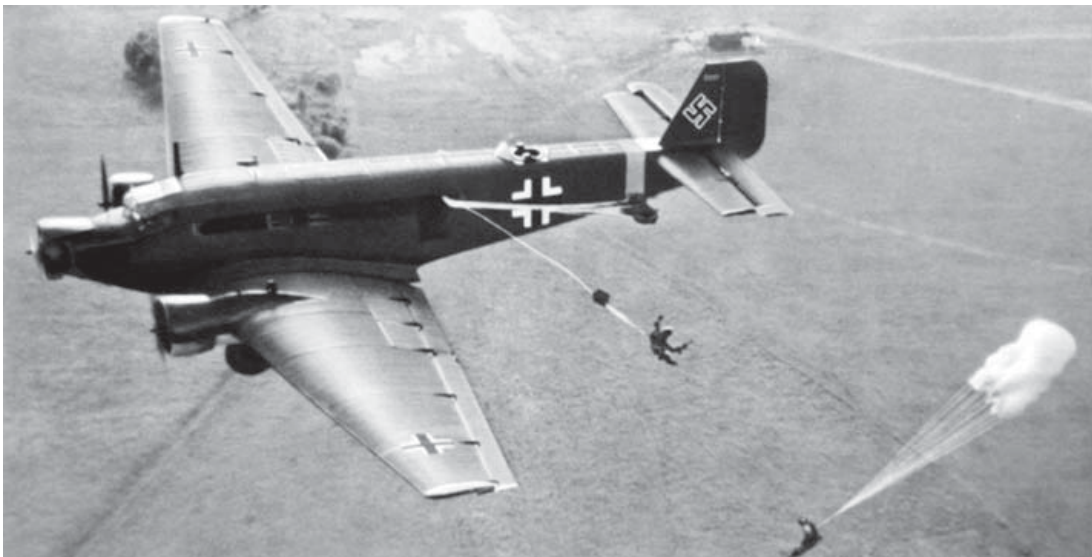
BUILDING AN ELITE

Airborne soldiers in both countries considered themselves as elite troops, but while both recruited volunteers Britain rerolled more units into the airborne forces than did Germany. Furthermore, the Germans benefited from support from the Heer and Luftwaffe and a successful amalgamation of their respective airborne forces was achieved, while the British suffered from inter-service rivalry. In late 1942, as the German political leadership could be more forthright in allocating military resources than British leaders, the German airborne soldier had more training time and combat experience than his British counterpart and, while heralded as an elite soldier in Germany, the airborne soldier's position within the British military establishment remained uncertain.

A practice jump from a Ju 52 – six needed to be completed to qualify. After practising landing drills and air-experience flights the first jump was made from 80m (263ft), with subsequent jumps from different heights, in different group sizes and at different times of day. The final jump was part of three 12-man sticks at 120m (394ft) followed by a tactical exercise on the ground. (Cody Images)

German

In February 1936 the German parachute training school was established at Stendal in Saxony and its 180 instructors soon processed 4,000 parachutists per year. The training course included a basic infantry-skills element lasting four weeks and comprising weapons handling, demolitions use, small-unit tactics, marching, and parade-ground drill, which needed to be passed if a recruit was to undergo jump training, also lasting four weeks. Martin Pöppel



recalled how 'training was unbelievably hard, but basically fair ... we never got a moment to think' (Pöppel 2000: 10). Training continued after posting to a unit. After joining the regimental signals platoon Pöppel attended troop-training grounds at Wildflecken, Bavaria, for two weeks in August 1939 where 'the marches, exercises, night alerts, the shooting and radio practices were all even worse than before' (Pöppel 2000: 11).

In September 1935, when Major Bruno Bräuer was asked to form a *Fallschirmjäger* battalion as part of Regiment 'General Göring', between 30 and 60 men from each company had volunteered. Rapid expansion was soon required and illustrated military magazines like the *Signal* encouraged applicants to think of parachute service as dynamic. Many new recruits were young, impressionable 18-year-olds, and as Hitler-Jugend members they already possessed military qualities and skills, having experienced a strong sense of community and participated in sports, orienteering, camping and shooting. Numerous recruits from all three services applied to be *Fallschirmjäger*; at first, however, the majority were Luftwaffe personnel. Sometimes entire companies could be enrolled, for example specialist units like combat engineers; Nr. 15 (*Pionier*) Kompanie of Regiment 'General Göring' volunteered *en masse*. Witzig, who from late autumn 1938 commanded the *Pionier-Zug* of the *Fallschirm-Infanterie-Bataillon des Heeres*, thought that his men were 'superior soldiers in every respect ... they had first volunteered for parachute training, joined the parachute infantry battalion, and then came as volunteers into the parachute engineers' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 44).

Even in 1943, recruits needed to be volunteers. Major Friedrich Freiherr von der Heydte, commander of I. Bataillon/*Fallschirmjäger*-Regiment 3 on Crete and then in North Africa, wrote: 'Any of three motives had induced these young fellows, who were scarcely more than boys, to volunteer for the parachutists: idealism, ambition, or adventure.' In his view idealists 'who had been in the Hitler Youth were saturated with national slogans, failed when they came to recognize that a soldier's trade is rough and ... were a latent danger to the feeling of comradeship.' He 'liked the adventurers best ... Their heads were filled with nonsensical pranks, but also with good ideas. They were born parachutists' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 24).

Student established principles to encourage an assertive outlook. First and foremost was the belief that 'you are the elite of the German Army' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 87). He wrote that 'the first thing to do is to instil regimental



Recruits, after a medical check, made a compulsory 15m (49ft) jump into a water tank, to determine fear of heights. Then new applicants were faced with cross-country runs, obstacle courses, tests in skill at arms and written exams about National Socialist history and doctrine, and an interview by the unit commander, before commencing paratroop training. (Cody Images)

spirit ... this pride must stem from a comradeship which is wider and deeper than that of any other regiment or corps' (quoted in McNab 2000: 37). To achieve this he thought the treatment of the airborne soldier 'must be more generous, more circumspect and more comradely than anywhere else' (quoted in McNab 2000: 10). Discipline was not supposed to be as severe as in the Heer; rather, according to Witzig's biographer, the emphasis was on 'instilling the right attitude and self belief system in order to enable the soldier to undertake some of the most demanding missions and combat duties in the German armed forces' (Villahermosa 2010: 25). Student wrote 'training must be based not on formal discipline based on fear and blind obedience but on the principle of mutual confidence'; for a *Fallschirmjäger* 'to be expelled from the corps and transferred to another unit for some transgression of the rules came to be regarded as a disgrace' (quoted in McNab 2000: 37). Success in battle added to their status and the high esteem with which they were regarded.

A conventional ground role created logistical difficulties. In Tunisia Witzig 'accepted it as completely natural that food, clothing and the postal service were available' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 159); however, his unit was short of vehicles, ammunition and fuel and suffered constant attrition. He asked for 280 replacements but received none. Personally he benefited from the policy of allowing all ranks 14 days' annual leave and went home to spend some time with his wife, which was certainly a tonic to morale. Following the decisive Axis defeat in Tunisia – and showing the importance attached to reconstituting previously shattered formations by hiving off leadership cadres to form new units – Witzig, along with 27 enlisted men remaining in his battalion, 'received instructions to embark myself and my officers on a motorboat ... [two officers and four NCOs] reached Trapani in Sicily on 10 May 1943' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 156).

British

In June 1940, recently appointed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked for 5,000 trained parachutists and a school was established at Ringway. No. 2 Commando attended from November and was renamed 11th Special Air Service Battalion. By spring 1941 the battalion was ready, but the RAF was reluctant to provide training aircraft and argued that paratroopers should be deployed by glider instead. Churchill visited again and was disgusted by the lack of progress. A new memorandum provided additional resources to make 1st Airborne Division operational by mid-1942. (The one concession the RAF won was to choose the landing zones of all operational drops, which would not bode well for the future.)

In late 1941 a recruitment drive was made, but most junior officers who volunteered were relatively inexperienced Territorial or temporary officers. On 8 September 1941 Lt Martin Willcock, who joined 2nd Parachute Battalion, read an advert for volunteers for parachute service and two weeks later attended an interview. He made a favourable impression, arrived at Chesterfield three days later, and met 'a mixed bunch from every regiment in



Here British recruits board a converted Whitley bomber. Frost complained that in November 1941 'all that the RAF could make available for training parachutists were six Whitleys' (Frost 1980: 33). Even in mid-1942, 'actual parachute training was minimal' because 'only a few squadrons of obsolete Whitleys were available' (Frost 1980: 63). (Cody Images)

the army' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 18). Frost attended a selection board for company commanders and after saying strict military discipline cramped initiative thought he had made a bad impression. He was mistaken, as the parachute arm's ethos was different from other conventional infantry, and was appointed as 2nd Parachute Battalion adjutant.

British regulations stipulated 'volunteers must be first class fighting soldiers and show keenness, intelligence and initiative and must be men of first class character' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 40). They needed to be between 22 and 32 years old (excepting those of NCO or officer rank) and were not to exceed 196lb. Alex Reid of 2nd Parachute Battalion, who read a poster entitled 'VOLUNTEERS REQUIRED for Airborne Troops', applied because he wanted 'to escape the deadly monotony of Army life on the home front' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 22). From October 1941 enlisted volunteers arrived at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, for parachute selection, enticed by an extra 2 shillings a day (4 for officers), and came from all regiments; many recruits were rejected, however, as 'some commanding officers unloaded unwanted material on us ... a good few were hardened criminals in the military and sometimes in the civil sense, and some had been arbitrarily detailed as if for an unpleasant fatigue party' (Frost 1980: 25). However, a two-week selection course, including running 2 miles in 16 minutes with full kit, weeded them out.

Training continued between campaigns. After the Tunisian battles 'prolonged training was now the order of the day,' which 'concentrated on moving across country by day and by night, and in ensuring that everybody had as much practice as they possibly could at using their weapons' (Frost 1980: 172). Here in Tunisia a paratrooper is throwing a No. 36 mills grenade, next to others equipped with a Mk II Sten and a .303in Enfield No. 4 rifle. (Cody Images)





This plate depicts a *Fallschirm-Pionier* of Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 11, two companies of which were deployed alongside armoured and artillery units as part of a *Kampfgruppe* under Witzig's command. His men had been in place for some time and had prepared their defensive positions with great care.

Green Hill, Tunisia, 5 January 1943



Weapons, Dress and Equipment

This man is armed with a bolt-action 7.92mm Kar 98k rifle (1); there were also special variants available for Fallschirmjäger, including the shortened Kar 98/42 and the Brunn Gew 33/40(t), a Czech-designed bolt-action weapon with folding stock. Side arms comprised the standard 9mm Luger P 08 pistol (2), but also the more popular 7.65mm Sauer Modell 38H. Stick grenades (3) were essential in close combat and were effective against tanks; by binding several together around a handle a powerful explosive device could be created. Fallschirmjäger wore a distinctive style of helmet (4); in North Africa and Italy it could be painted dull yellow, often with green and rust patches added in Tunisia because low foliage

such as cactus was commonplace. A splinter-camouflage or tan helmet cover could be worn. A green splinter-camouflage or plain olive-green smock (5) was worn, which opened in front and was secured by buttons or a zip, and possessed two large chest and thigh pockets. It was worn over Luftwaffe-issue tropical clothing, including baggy trousers in lightweight cotton (6). Each Fallschirmjäger received a pair of ankle-length jump-boots (7) that had thick rubber soles to protect the feet while landing. Equipment included a water bottle (8), M1938 gas-mask case (9), canteen (10), S84/98 bayonet (11), folded green splinter-camouflage shelter-quarter (12) and bread bag (13). Combat load was roughly 36kg (79lb).

Parachute training was conducted on converted Whitley bombers and was a real shock to many. An RAF officer commented that because ‘the Whitley fuselage is dark and gloomy ... and is bad for the nerves’, in one aircraft ‘Four men fainted ... while a number jumped in a state of collapse’ (quoted in Cherry 2011: 26). Five men dropped from either side at 700ft over 500yd, which restricted the aircraft’s use to the training ground. The parachute course was just the start of their training. Endurance marches tested stamina and moral and physical courage. In August 1942 2nd Parachute Battalion, accompanied by parachute engineers, conducted live-firing exercises, and with the assistance of machine guns and mortars attacked pillboxes.

In Tunisia the level of attrition was such that maintaining manning levels with sufficiently well-trained replacements was challenging, especially because moving them to their destination could be so time consuming. In December 1942 200 replacements left Hardwick for North Africa; however, Frost complained that many had been AAA (anti-aircraft artillery) gunners ‘with little experience of infantry work’ (Frost 1980: 111).

The public image of the Airborne needed some work, which only successful achievements would change. Units took a while to coalesce, which was assisted by competitive unit exercises and extra-curricular activities. However, because of their rigorous training, special role, and better pay and equipment, morale was high. Willcock recalled how ‘the one thing that we all had in common from the Col to the Private – was that we had JUMPED – a unique experience which we would never forget and one which made us all feel the Battalion was something rather special’ (quoted in Peatling 2004: 18).

Here Witzig is pictured in 1940 after the Eben Emael operation. In 1944 he would be awarded the Oakleaves to his Knight’s Cross – one of 15 *Fallschirmjäger* to receive this award; like many other *Fallschirmjäger* officers he served in the Bundeswehr, from 1956 to 1974. (Cody Images)



LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS

Airborne operations needed forthright leadership. Because airborne forces were often so exposed, the ability of leaders to make good tactical judgements was paramount – a mistake could have calamitous consequences. German officers, unlike most of their British counterparts, already had experience as combat soldiers, either because many came from the ranks or because service as an NCO was part of their officer training. They could be given more responsibility than their rank implied because training taught them tactical method and how to cope with situations their superiors might face. By 1942 Germany’s senior leadership had learned the strengths and limitations of the airborne arm; in contrast, the British were still learning lessons and under pressure to prove themselves.

German

Those selected for officer training were thoroughly instructed; direct-entry cadets attended four months’ basic training, then six months’ NCO training, followed by field service for three months (during wartime, officer cadets served



FAR LEFT

A *Fallschirmjäger* NCO. Witzig thought he had 'outstanding Sergeants' who he relied upon to command platoons – by 10 January 1943 all were NCOs (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 159). Witzig believed that 'if any success was to be achieved in the prevailing conditions, the leaders of all ranks had to act on their own initiative within the framework of the general combat task' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 149). (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-572-1743-25, Foto: Seeger, Erwin)

in front-line units), an officer course for another three and then the advanced officer course, learning their profession, for an additional three – 19 months in total, which included experience as an NCO and an emphasis on learning tactical drills. The divide between *Fallschirmjäger* officers and NCOs was less marked than in the older branches of service and because a high degree of responsibility was demanded of NCOs, many were selected for officer training.

The Germans preferred the section leader – normally an *Oberjäger* – to control the gun group directly and lead it in the assault. The platoon commander, usually an *Oberfeldwebel* or perhaps a *Leutnant*, directed the actions of his sections through hand signals. The company commander, typically an *Oberleutnant* or *Leutnant*, did not have a deputy by his side (the Nr. 1 Zug leader adopted this role); he could use radio or runners to transmit his orders.

In the attack German reliance on mission-oriented tactics (*Auftragstaktik*) and devolved command led to less reliance on radio communications and provided more room for junior officers to take the initiative; because of their common understanding of tactical doctrine this rarely led to disjointed engagements but often inspired decisive interventions that broke through the fog of war. However, the Germans also had a backpack radio issued at platoon and company level; it operated in VHF, which was limited to line of sight and allowed co-ordination of platoons. In established defensive positions the *Fallschirmjäger* used field telephones, but lines could be damaged during artillery bombardments. Witzig praised Leutnant Heise's signals platoon for maintaining a working telephone link from his positions on Green Hill to Kesselring in Rome.

More senior officers tended to be professional soldiers and frequently objected to the new ideological upbringing. Walter Koch, a former policeman, joined the Regiment 'General Göring' in 1935. For him camaraderie overrode ideology and his chivalry in victory at Depienne would cost him dear after his return to Germany, where he died in a mysterious accident in October 1943. In 1935 Witzig joined the Heer as a volunteer officer cadet and in 1938 volunteered to be a *Fallschirmjäger*. He was from a middle-class northern German Protestant

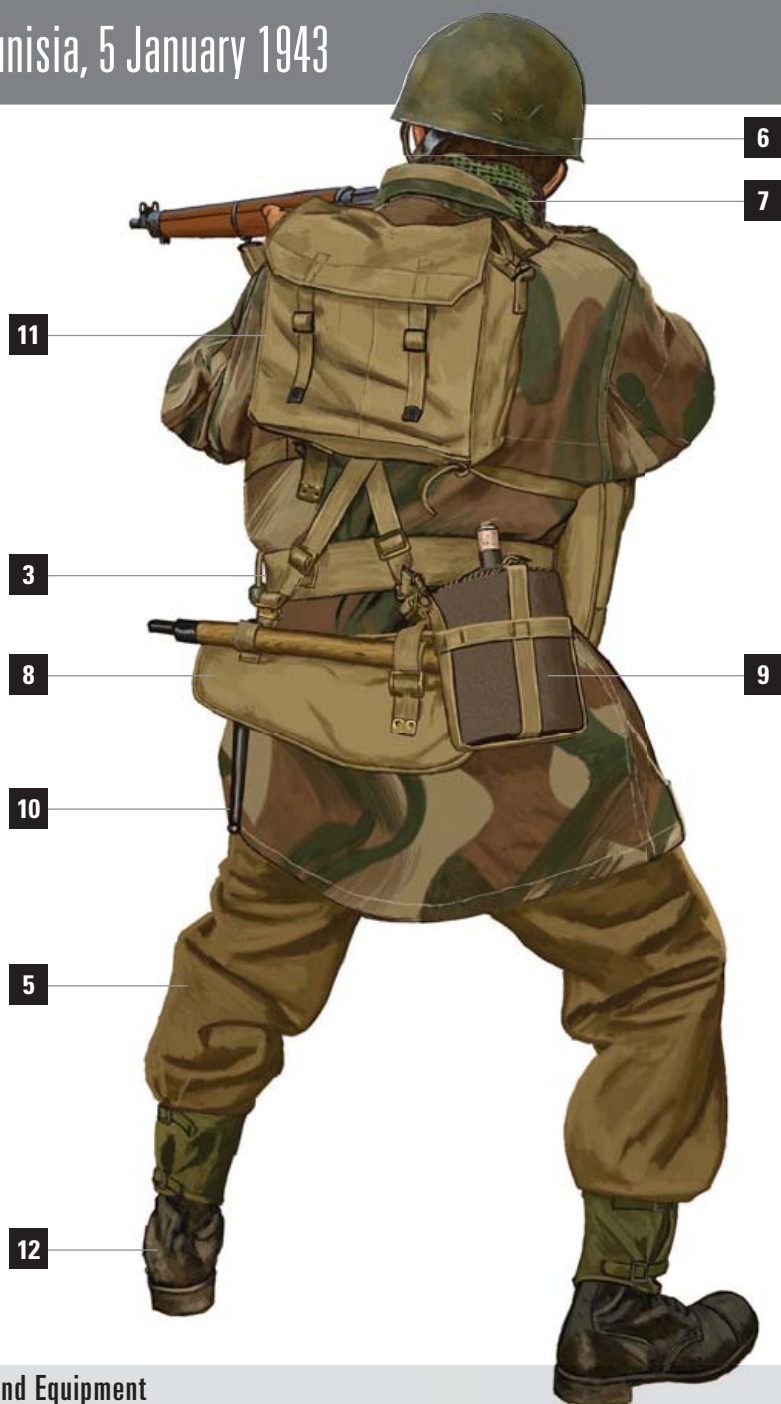
LEFT

Walter Koch completed parachute training in 1936 and in 1938 commanded Nr. 1 Kompanie/ Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1 as a *Hauptmann*. After Eben Emael, Major Koch was given command of I. Battalion/ Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment, equipped with gliders. He suffered a serious head wound near Maleme airfield on Crete; he recovered, and on 11 March 1942 was selected to lead the newly created Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-L04232, Foto: o. Ang)



This plate depicts a private soldier of 3rd Parachute Battalion as he would have looked during the British attack on Green Hill in the early hours of 5 January 1943. Having arrived by rail two days earlier, the Paras fought as conventional assault infantry in the battle for this key strategic area of high ground.

Green Hill, Tunisia, 5 January 1943



Weapons, Dress and Equipment

Like most paratroopers, this man is armed with a .303in Enfield No. 4 rifle (1); this was normally a reliable weapon, but in North Africa, Browning reported in late December 1942, the 'bolt inclined to jam and aperture sight to fill with sand, both due to bad weather conditions and lack of proper care' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 324). The effective engagement range was 500yd; 50 rounds of ammunition in ten chargers of five rounds were carried in each of two webbing pouches (2), making 100 rounds in total.

The 1937-pattern webbing (3) was worn over the Denison smock (4). The smock had a yellowish background with random dark-green

and brown patches, and was worn over a sarge battledress (5). The standard Airborne troops' helmet was worn (6). Distinctively for airborne troops a face veil was issued for camouflage purposes, but was often used as a scarf for warmth or comfort (7). An entrenching tool (8), 2-pint water bottle (9) and bayonet (10) were attached to the webbing belt. A haversack (11) was carried on the back, normally containing two days' rations, and cooking and cleaning kits. For airborne drops ankle boots with rubber soles (12) were worn. All in all, the maximum combat load was 110lb, but not all would carry this weight.

family; his father was a civil engineer and his uncle, a naval officer. He had been a company commander in the Hitler-Jugend, but not a Nazi Party member.

British

British airborne platoon leaders were invariably junior officers rather than NCOs and rather than becoming embroiled in the firefight were supposed to direct the actions of section commanders along with the deployment of support weapons. Unlike their infantry equivalent, where leadership by example was necessary to motivate the men to move forward, a junior Airborne officer could rely more on NCOs to operate independently and lead their section to close with the enemy. (To attract a high-calibre NCO, applicants were required to have been recommended for promotion.) However, most were keen to prove themselves and many were prepared to take undue risks, which four months' basic officer training, with its emphasis on teaching soldiering rather than tactical-awareness leadership, did not prepare them well for.

Crucially, both NCOs and junior officers attended a bespoke Battle School at Hardwick Hall to learn tactics. During training instructors made it clear to both officers and NCOs that if they could not do what was expected of the other ranks they would be transferred. Each section was commanded by a sergeant, who was schooled in co-ordinating both the gun group and rifle group in fire and manoeuvre tactics, and husbanding ammunition with fire-control orders. He had a corporal as second-in-command and a lance-corporal in charge of the gun group. At first, Frost initially complained, 'very few were able to exert their authority unless an officer was actually present and a large number of men suffered from the misapprehension that military discipline was out of date' (Frost 1980: 26), but by the time of the Bruneval operation, 'the NCOs had found themselves' (Frost 1980: 38).

Company commanders, all majors assisted by a captain as a deputy, focused on the progress of the battle but may have inherited limited understanding of tactical doctrine; only from early 1939 was this tested in the major's exam. They would communicate with the battalion commander, who would be monitoring the overall situation, and in whom great reliance was placed. Frost asserted that experienced officers were rare, which may have allowed the parachute brigade more freedom to develop its own training regime: 'most ... had received quick promotion and looked askance at my mere captaincy after nine years' service' (Frost 1980: 24). Beneficially, officers came from various social backgrounds: Maj Richard Ashford, OC A Company (killed on 4 February 1943), was a socialist from the ranks who 'disliked regular officers on principle', Maj Frank Cleaver, OC B Company, was also an ex-ranker but 'with all the traditional loyalties' (Frost 1980: 67).

Airborne forces dropped behind enemy lines and companies could operate independently, therefore the battalion commander needed efficient means of controlling them. The No. 18 standard portable man-pack radio enabled him to communicate with his companies; Browning described it as being 'better than

expected' and reported that it maintained a 'good range of 7 to 8 miles, but up to 14 miles on occasion'; even so, at 34lb it was 'still too heavy' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 325). Since Bruneval 'the new 38 wireless set with which the Company Commander could keep in direct communication with his platoons' was issued (Frost 1980: 40), which weighed 27lb 8oz and had a range of 1 mile. Both were VHF and, lacking over-the-horizon capability, were of limited utility in the Tunisian hills. (At Oudna, because the radios were too heavy to be manhandled and the batteries were soon worn out, Frost would resort to using a series of sound signals, including his Iraqi hunting horn, to rally his men.) In Sicily, reliability was again an issue, but the flatter terrain allowed intermittent communications with the relieving force; the air-landing gun-battery observer even called in naval gunfire support with his radio. Often runners were more effective and at least three were available per company. In static positions the battalion's communications platoon set up landlines.



MOBILITY, TACTICS AND FIREPOWER

The Germans had their own bespoke aircraft, the Ju 52, for the delivery of airborne forces, but by late 1942 the numbers produced could not keep up with the rate of loss. In contrast, the British benefited from the arrival of the American DC-3 Dakota transport aircraft, which removed their reliance on converted RAF bombers and allowed them to carry more troops than the Ju 52. Because airborne forces arriving by parachute could only carry limited weaponry, both sides developed special versions of heavier support weapons that could be fitted into parachute containers, but the preferred solution was to deliver them by glider. The Germans developed the largest, which were used to transport artillery and anti-tank guns as well as military stores, and such aircraft were particularly effective in moving equipment to friendly airfields, which suited the German's deployment of their airborne forces as strategic reserves. While tactically both sides proved they could adapt to most situations, albeit within the limitations imposed by their equipment, in terms of the quality and quantity of firepower available to the airborne soldier from within their own formations the Germans had the advantage. The British were hampered because interwar weapons development had focused on providing accurate lightweight weapons for troops engaged in small frontier wars rather than firepower.

Here, Gen Eisenhower is awarding Frost a decoration. Originally the 2nd Parachute Battalion adjutant, Frost was appointed OC C Company for the Bruneval raid because Edwin Flavell, at that time the CO, felt that a Scot needed to command this all-Scottish company for such an important ground-breaking assignment. During embarkation to North Africa Lt-Col Gofton Salmond, the new CO, was taken ill and Maj Frost, then the 2ic, succeeded him. (Airborne Assault Museum, Duxford)

German

In early 1942 German parachutists were still jumping armed only with pistols, grenades and submachine guns; rifles and light machine guns were dropped separately in containers. By 1943, heavier weapons were delivered by heavy-lift

gliders such as the Me 321, the impact of which Student overestimated by stressing the 'great possibilities of giant aircraft ... in the future course of war' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 118). Once *Fallschirmjäger* became involved in ground operations having their vehicles available was important, but air-transport shortages meant they were often left behind.

German tactical doctrine was founded on an aggressive use of the light machine gun, and there was less distinction between rifle and machine-gun groups within the rifle section. Student's principles for the *Fallschirmjäger* stressed skill at arms: 'ammunition is the most precious thing. He who shoots uselessly, merely to reassure himself, is a man without guts' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 87). Machine-gun fire provided the core fire support, capable of disrupting enemy attacks or enabling section and platoon assaults. In the defence, 1st Parachute Battalion noted after the Tunisian campaign, the German soldier was 'an artist at concealing his weapons in defiladed positions ... [and made] use of concealed machine guns and light automatics which lie low when overrun and then come to life again' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 398).

The general-purpose belt-fed 7.92mm MG 34 and MG 42 were issued to the *Fallschirmjäger*. The 1943 re-organization provided for two per section, rather than the usual one; in July 1943 *Fallschirmjäger*-Regimenter 3 and 4 were organized along these lines, but *Fallschirmjäger*-Regiment 5, set up in mid-1942, still had only one per section in Tunisia. When these weapons were deployed as a rifle section's light machine gun the gunner carried one 50-round belt, which could be loaded into a side-mounted drum; the assistant carried four more, plus a box of 300 rounds, while an ammunition bearer could carry two further boxes for a total of 1,150 rounds per gun. *Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 1*, a corps-level support unit, was particularly effective at providing fire support, having four machine-gun companies with MG 42s set up on tripods.

The bolt-action 7.92mm Mauser Gew 98 and Kar 98k rifles were standard issue alongside pistols and grenades. For ammunition carriage, the Germans developed a bespoke parachutist's bandolier with 12 compartments, each holding ten rounds, meaning 120 additional rounds could be carried as well as

After Crete, German containers were of a standard size – 4.6m (15ft) long and 38cm (15in) in diameter – and capable of carrying 115kg (254lb) of equipment. The end that hit the ground first had a corrugated-iron pad, which crushed on impact. For added protection the contents were packed in felt or held in place by support straps. For a rifle platoon of 43 men, 14 containers were required. German containers were fitted with wheels and a handle to increase mobility but could easily go astray, especially at night. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-304-0634-07, Foto: Funke)



the 60 (two five-round clips in each of six pouches on the waist-belt) normally carried by Wehrmacht riflemen. To give added firepower the 9mm MP 40 machine pistol was allocated in greater numbers than in most other Wehrmacht units, especially to NCOs and officers; six magazines, each with 32 rounds, were carried in two triple pouches. Capable of being used in the direct-line-of-sight and indirect-fire modes, mortars were ideal for providing fire support to parachute troops because they were capable of laying down multiple rounds quickly from a weapon that could be dismantled and moved relatively easily. In 1942 the 5cm variant, with a limited range of 500m (547yd), had been largely discontinued as a company-level support weapon and replaced with the 8.1cm mortar offering a range of 1,100m (1,203yd). The heavier 12cm calibre with a 6,000m (6,562yd) range was used at regimental level. Recoilless rifles such as the 7.5cm IG 40 and the 10.5cm IG 42 were not as favoured at the small-unit level because of exposure due to back blast, but two 7.5cm IG 40 accompanied each battalion's machine-gun company.

For use against enemy armour anti-tank rifles such as the 7.92mm PzB 39, grenade bundles and Teller mines were used. In 1941 a heavier anti-tank rifle the 2.8cm sPzB 41, based on a cone-shaped barrel, with the calibre reducing from 28mm at the chamber end to only 20mm at the muzzle, entered service. More like an anti-tank gun, the weapon fired tungsten armour-piercing shells. A special lightweight carriage was developed for *Fallschirmjäger*, which replaced wheels with small rollers and typically omitted the gun shield. The weapon weighed only 139kg (306lb) and the carriage supported a 360° field of fire with elevation ranging from -15° to 25°, which made it popular in the Tunisian hills. The weapon was also deployed on Sicily but did not see action with *Fallschirmjäger* – in that battle the more conventional 7.5cm PaK 40 towed AT gun equipped the divisional Panzerjäger-Abteilung and the 14. Panzerjäger-Kompanie of each *Fallschirmjäger* regiment.

Fallschirm-Pioniere specialized in establishing fortifications and enhancing defensive positions for other units, but were often employed in the front line and given their own sector of front to defend or assault. Their role included the laying of mines. Teller mines were anti-vehicle devices planted 5cm (2in) below the surface. They were either pressure- or fuse-detonated, weighed 8kg (17lb 10oz) and contained 5.5kg (12lb 2oz) of TNT. The anti-personnel 'S' mine weighed 4kg (8lb 14oz) and contained 250–360 steel balls. It was pressure- or remotely activated, and propelled itself 1–1.5m (3ft 4in–4ft 11in) into the air before scattering its contents, which could be lethal within a 25m (82ft) radius.

Here a *Fallschirmjäger* mortar crew has set up in a foxhole. To be fitted into a container, the 8.1cm airborne variant had a shorter barrel than the Heer equivalent; it could fire high-explosive, smoke and illumination rounds, which bounced back into the air on landing before exploding. The weapon was responsible for 40 per cent of shell-shock cases among British troops in Tunisia. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-577-1917-08, Foto: Haas)



British

While parachute training had been conducted on converted Whitley bombers, American DC-3 Dakota aircraft became available from October 1942, which had a range of 1,600 miles at 230mph. The aircraft were altogether more suitable and could carry 27 airborne soldiers sitting facing inwards in two rows; the parachutists could leave the aircraft in 11 seconds over about 450yd. Pilots flew low until approaching the drop zone, when they rose to 700ft, but because of limited pilot experience no night-time operations were possible. Within their own lines British paratroopers benefited from a motor park. Behind Axis lines gliders could bring in artillery, with vehicles to tow them, and reconnaissance jeeps, but for the most part paratroopers needed to requisition transport as best they could. In North Africa and Sicily there was no provision for aerial resupply once parachutists had dropped as it was assumed relieving forces would soon be on the scene.

As with the infantry, the Airborne rifle section relied on the Bren gun to sustain the fire; each soldier of the three-man gun group could operate the weapon and carried a share of its ammunition. The gun group also carried a 2in mortar, used primarily to fire smoke rounds. The Airborne rifle section also included a six-man rifle group, but because the bolt-action rifle offered a modest rate of fire, Sten 'machine carbines' (submachine guns), which had only been introduced in June 1941, could be substituted from the battalion equipment pool as required.

On the march the section leader, usually a sergeant, would be in front, followed by the gun group, and then the rifle group; one or two men could be scouting ahead. If the enemy was encountered the riflemen formed an extended line with 5yd between men, with the Bren either in the centre or on a flank. The Bren team targeted enemy positions so the rifle group could close with the enemy; often there was insufficient fire support from heavy weapons to allow the rifle group to close in one move, so they would need to move in several bounds with the Bren providing cover.

If enemy resistance was expected, rifle platoons could use the arrowhead formation. On encountering the enemy, the lead section attempted to pin them while the platoon commander moved his other sections into an assault position, preferably against the flank. Once the section reached cover they provided fire support for the remaining sections to move up. Alternatively, an inverted arrowhead formation could be adopted with two sections advancing in parallel, with the third held back in the centre. Companies, with three platoons, copied these tactical formations with

The Halifax-towed Horsa glider could carry either 20–25 troops or, as was the case at Primosole, a jeep and a 6-pdr gun. To avoid AAA fire and spend less time in the air, the glider cast off close to the target, typically at 1,200ft at 140kts (161mph), and made a steep descent, diving at 45° and losing 2,500ft per minute, touching down at 80kts (92mph) in about 175yd. (Cody Images)



support weapons located with the company commander.

In North Africa and Sicily the ground was often devoid of cover and attacks were often made at night; gaining the objective and taking up good defensive positions on high ground proved essential. Paratroopers needed to dig entrenchments for all-round defence and mutual support. Brens were sited to enfilade the enemy and achieve interlocking arcs of fire. A paper drafted by 1st Parachute Battalion after the Tunisian campaign stipulated that 'sections should be within 60 yds of their platoon commander, a company locality should fit inside a circle of 1000 yards diameter, and within a battalion layout companies should be within small arms range for supporting fire' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 398–99). The company would usually have two platoons forward, with the third in reserve capable of launching local counter-attacks; the battalion adopted a similar formation for its companies.

Engineers were a vital support element within the airborne brigade and each had one squadron. The use of explosives to break up enemy fortifications or establish more elaborate defensive positions by laying mines were particularly in demand in operations that involved the capture or destruction of strategically important structures, such as Primosole Bridge. No. 1 Parachute Squadron, RE consisted of four troops (including an HQ Troop), which contained both assault troops and technical specialists, and deployed with 1st Parachute Brigade to North Africa and Sicily – one squadron was assigned to each battalion.

Most paratroopers used the .303in Enfield No. 4 bolt-action rifle. Parachutists were not intended to maintain themselves in the front line for long, so were equipped as light troops; as few as 150 rifle rounds per man was considered standard issue, with 100 rounds carried in webbing pouches, and typically a bandolier containing five pockets (ten rounds per pocket). One rifle-grenade discharger attachment was carried per section and each man carried two No. 36 Mills grenades in his smock pockets. Each parachute battalion was provided with a reserve pool of 429 Sten submachine guns, which was more effective than the Enfield at 300yd, and so all rifles could be replaced, if necessary. For the Bruneval raid, Frost recalled, 'we were all equipped with Stens' (Frost 1980: 40). Nine magazines for a total of 288 rounds – one magazine loaded in the weapon, plus four carried in each of the two webbing pouches – could be carried. For those personnel carrying sidearms, .45in US-issue Colts were preferred because the British Enfield .38 No. 2 revolver had a notoriously heavy trigger pull and was difficult to fire accurately.



Here the airborne version of the 2in mortar is being fired by a paratrooper in Tunisia. The Mk VII* had a shorter barrel than the conventional infantry equivalent – 19in instead of 27in. A small trigger mechanism at the breech could fire a 2lb 3oz HE, 4lb 6oz smoke, or parachute flare round up to 500yd. From June 1942 paratrooper sections each had one, but because each battalion possessed ten 3in mortars the 2in weapons were commonly used to throw smoke rounds, an essential component of platoon-level tactics, rather than HE rounds. (Cody Images)



The 3in mortar threw a 10lb bomb 1,600yd; weighing 124lb, it could be dropped in a container, but was not man portable and when disassembled had to be loaded onto mules for transportation. 2nd Parachute Battalion standing orders stated that in defence the mortar crews had 'alternative positions prepared in addition from which they can bring fire down on their own localities in the event of these being overrun' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 343). (IWM H 25882)

a five-round magazine capable of penetrating 21mm (0.826in) of armour, which by 1942 would damage only the tracks of enemy tanks. Otherwise, the No. 82 Gammon grenade, a stockingette bag filled with plastic explosive invented in 1941 by Capt R.J. 'Jock' Gammon of 1st Parachute Battalion, was available. The No. 75 Hawkins grenade, which needed to be placed underneath a tank's tracks, and the No. 74 sticky (ST) grenade, which needed to be placed on the tank, were also available and engineers specialized in their use.

Issued in time for Sicily, a safer option with a range of up to 110yd was the PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank), a 32lb weapon that fired a rocket-propelled hollow-charge round capable of destroying most German tanks on the island except Tigers. However, on Sicily only 60 per cent of hits were achieved at 100yd and only three-quarters of these detonated because of faulty fuses. From December 1941, 1st Airlanding Anti-Tank Battery was attached to 1st Parachute Brigade; it provided two troops of 6-pdr AT guns, which was never enough for conventional ground operations. For use by the Airborne, the gun was modified: the axle was shortened and the front fixed armoured shield removed, in order for the gun, along with its towing jeep, to fit the 4ft 6in width of a Horsa glider. There was insufficient room for a trailer, however, so the ammunition (42 rounds) had to be carried on the jeep. The weapon had an effective range of 1,600yd and could penetrate the armour of most German medium tanks and SP guns. On Sicily ten 6-pdrs would be taken into battle by air for the first time.

British support weapons could not compete with their German equivalents. The 22lb Mk II Bren, rather than being belt fed, had detachable 30-round box magazines, which limited the weapon's rate of fire. Two magazines could be held in each webbing pouch. Per rifle section, 25 magazines were usually provided, one with the gun and each rifleman carrying two and each of the three men in the gun group, four. The 2in mortar was predominantly used to fire smoke rounds. During the Tunisian campaign battalion-support weapons consisted solely of 3in mortars firing high-explosive bombs. Browning suggested in his December 1942 report that this was insufficient and by the time Sicily was invaded the World War I-vintage Vickers .303in medium machine gun with its 250-round belts had been added to the Airborne's inventory. Along with its water tank and tripod the 121lb Vickers was quite bulky.

For protection against armoured vehicles the bolt-action Boys AT rifle was standard issue; it fired a high-velocity 13.97mm round from

Pont du Fahs, Depienne and Oudna

29 November—4 December 1942

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

By the beginning of November 1942 the Axis Powers were on the back foot in the Mediterranean. Lt-Gen Bernard Montgomery had driven Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel from Egypt and was pursuing him across the Libyan Desert. On 8 November Operation *Torch* landed American and British forces in French-occupied North Africa to take the Tunisian ports that Rommel needed to evacuate his Deutsches Afrikakorps to the European mainland; however, because of the danger of Axis air attack, the closest landing beaches the Allies chose were around Algiers. This decision gave the Germans the opportunity to move into Tunisia; the point forces for such a rapid strategic deployment were Oberstleutnant Walter Koch's Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 and Major Rudolf Witzig's Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 11, two parachute formations recently created around cadres of the survivors of those units that had taken part in the airborne assault on Crete in 1941.

In late 1942 Britain also deployed an airborne capability to the Mediterranean theatre – Brigadier Edwin Flavell's 1st Parachute Brigade. The capture of Bône (12 November) and Souk-el-Arba (16 November) by 1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions respectively seemed to herald an encouraging debut, but these operations were largely successful because the parachute drops went unchallenged by French troops.

On 12 November, four days after the Torch landings, men of Lt-Col Frost's 2nd Parachute Battalion are seen here disembarking from their troop transport in Algiers. Frost had unexpectedly replaced Lt-Col G.P. Gofton-Salmond as CO just prior to the transport ship leaving Scotland. He only realized he was heading for North Africa after their 'convoy turned into the Straits of Gibraltar' (Frost 1980: 65). (IWM NA 89)



Here in Tunis recently arrived Fallschirmjäger take a break. From Rheims Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 had been transported by train to Naples; from there on 11 November Nr. 10 Kompanie flew to Tunis and Nr. 3 Kompanie arrived the next day. The rest of III. Bataillon followed on 14 and 15 November and I. Bataillon by 21 November. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-788-0006A-04, Foto: Wörner)



The Germans were desperate to win the race for Tunis and Hitler, hoping to make Tunisia the ‘Verdun of the Mediterranean’, reinforced the bridgehead rather than organizing a Dunkirk-style retreat. By the end of November 33,000 Allied troops of Lt-Gen Kenneth Anderson’s First Army were advancing into Tunisia; however, a lack of transport and mountain roads slowed their movements. The delay enabled the Germans to deploy 15,000 troops to Tunisia by late November, with 130 tanks and 90 artillery/anti-tank pieces, including elements of 10. Panzer-Division. Any Allied airborne operation into such a cauldron was bound to be risky. By 27 November the Allied attack was in full swing, with the British 11th Infantry Brigade and the US 1st Armored Division’s Combat Command B in Tebourba, only 10 miles from Tunis. Because the Germans’ III. Fliegerkorps had won air superiority, the Allied priority was to take and destroy Axis airfields by aerial assault.

In November 1942 Brigadier Flavell attended Allied headquarters at the old colonial St George Hotel in Algiers daily to ask for a suitable mission for Lt-Col John Frost’s 2nd Parachute Battalion. An ambitious plan to drop them near the Tunisian ports was discarded. Other options were becoming redundant because of the speed developments were taking on the ground. Frost, though, remained optimistic: ‘nobody knew what airborne forces could be expected to do and we certainly didn’t know ourselves; though one thing we felt quite certain: that there was practically nothing we couldn’t do’ (Frost 1980: 65).

The mission selected for 2nd Parachute Battalion involved dropping behind enemy lines on the southern route to Tunis to seize enemy airfields. Amazingly, a plan for a drop at Pont du Fahs airfield followed by a march on Depienne airfield 12 miles to the north and then Oudna airfield another 12 miles further on was considered viable. The Airborne would then wait for a link-up with ground units. Frost’s battalion would clash with Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5, part of a German counter-attacking force seeking to expand the Axis bridgehead, and would fight for its life with its German opponents over

five days in an attempt to withdraw 50 miles to regain Allied lines. Frost accepted the task, but was concerned his men would be exposed to enemy armour because of his lack of anti-tank weapons.

On the German side, Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5's I. Bataillon (Hauptmann Hans Jungwirth) and III. Bataillon (Hauptmann Wilhelm Knoche) were available in Tunisia, but Major Friedrich Hübner's II. Bataillon was with Rommel in Libya. At first Knoche's III. Battalion had deployed as far west as it could, to the River Medjerda. On 25 November a British attack was driven off, but the *Fallschirmjäger* were overexposed and withdrew the following day to just west of Massicault. General der Panzertruppe Walter Nehring, given command of the German units rushing to Tunisia, briefed Kesselring that it was doubtful the shallow front from Bizerta to Tunis could be held. However, German armoured reinforcements soon came into play. On 30 November elements of 10. Panzer-Division – one battalion of Panzer-Regiment 7 including a Tiger company – rolled right off the docks into combat to the north of Tebourba. All available elements of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 were told to move on the town from their positions further south.

German Tigers and PzKpfw IV supported by Ju 87 dive-bombers overwhelmed American armoured forces equipped with Stuart and Lee tanks. Further south Koch's *Fallschirmjäger* advanced south-west on both sides of the road to Medjez-el-Bab and came up against elements of 11th Infantry Brigade. Once he heard of Frost's landing at Depienne, 30 miles south-east of Tebourba, Koch diverted two rifle companies – Leutnant Erich Schuster's Nr. 1 Kompanie and Oberleutnant Ullrich Jahn's Nr. 10 Kompanie – with supporting armoured vehicles from 10. Panzer-Division's reconnaissance battalion, Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 90, to engage him, and ordered the rest of Knoche's III. Bataillon to follow. The remaining elements of Jungwirth's I. Bataillon would continue to swing north to El Bathan to relieve a platoon of *Fallschirm-Pioniere* commanded by Feldwebel Arendt that had earlier infiltrated behind enemy lines to seize the bridge over the River Medjerda and complete the encirclement of the Allied force at Terbourba. The German victories at Tebourba and El Bathan would mean that Frost would not be relieved and Koch would have an opportunity to locate, harass and destroy the British parachute battalion.

INTO COMBAT

At dawn on Sunday 29 November 1942 530 men of Frost's 2nd Parachute Battalion, accompanied by Capt Dennis Vernon's B Troop, 1st Parachute Squadron, RE, and No. 2 Section, 16 Parachute Field Ambulance, RAMC, prepared to embark on 40 Dakotas. Heavy rain caused many trucks carrying men to their aircraft to become mired in the mud by the side of the runway. One of the Dakotas also became stuck and was unable to take off, leaving behind half of Lt Denis 'Bucky' Boiteux-Buchanan's platoon of C Company.

2nd Parachute Battalion and Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5, Depienne to Medjez-el-Bab, November–December 1942

- 1 1400hrs, 29 November:** 2nd Parachute Battalion drops near Depienne airfield.
- 2 Early morning, 30 November:** Oberstleutnant Koch and Hauptmann Jungwirth make a reconnaissance as far south as Depienne.
- 3 1100hrs, 30 November:** 2nd Parachute Battalion deploys on low hills overlooking Oudna airfield.
- 4 Midday, 30 November (approx.):** Boiteux-Buchanan's party are captured by Italian troops at Depienne airfield.
- 5 1315hrs, 30 November:** 2nd Parachute Battalion puts in attack on Oudna airfield.
- 6 1630hrs, 30 November:** German armour attacks Oudna airfield; Bf 109 fighters strafe the British positions.
- 7 2000hrs, 30 November:** 2nd Parachute Battalion reaches high ground at Prise de L'Eau.
- 8 Early morning, 1 December:** Elements of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 advance south of Oudna.
- 9 1000hrs, 1 December:** German motorized column probes British positions; Oberleutnant Jahn is killed in an unsuccessful German attack; Germans ask Frost to surrender via a captured British sergeant, but are rebuffed by Frost.
- 10 1500hrs, 1 December:** Having reached higher ground at about 1430hrs, Frost observes German lorried infantry on the plain; the British adopt reverse-slope positions. At 1700hrs, Bf 109 fighters mistakenly attack German armour but fail to spot British positions.
- 11 Early evening, 1 December:** 2nd Parachute Battalion crosses the River Miliane en route to Massicault.
- 12 1500hrs, 2 December:** After A Company rejoins the rest of 2nd Parachute Battalion at El Fedja ('Cactus Farm') at 1200hrs, elements of III Bataillon/Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 commence mortar and machine-gun fire on British positions. At 1815hrs, Frost's men begin their withdrawal from Cactus Farm.
- 13 0300hrs, 3 December:** Frost's party stumbles into Capt Vernon's column.
- 14 1200hrs, 3 December:** Frost's men take cover from a German armoured-car patrol near Ksar Tyr.
- 15 1500hrs, 4 December:** Frost's party links up with US troops in half-tracks.
- 16 Early evening, 4 December:** Remnants of 2nd Parachute Battalion reach Medjez-el-Bab.

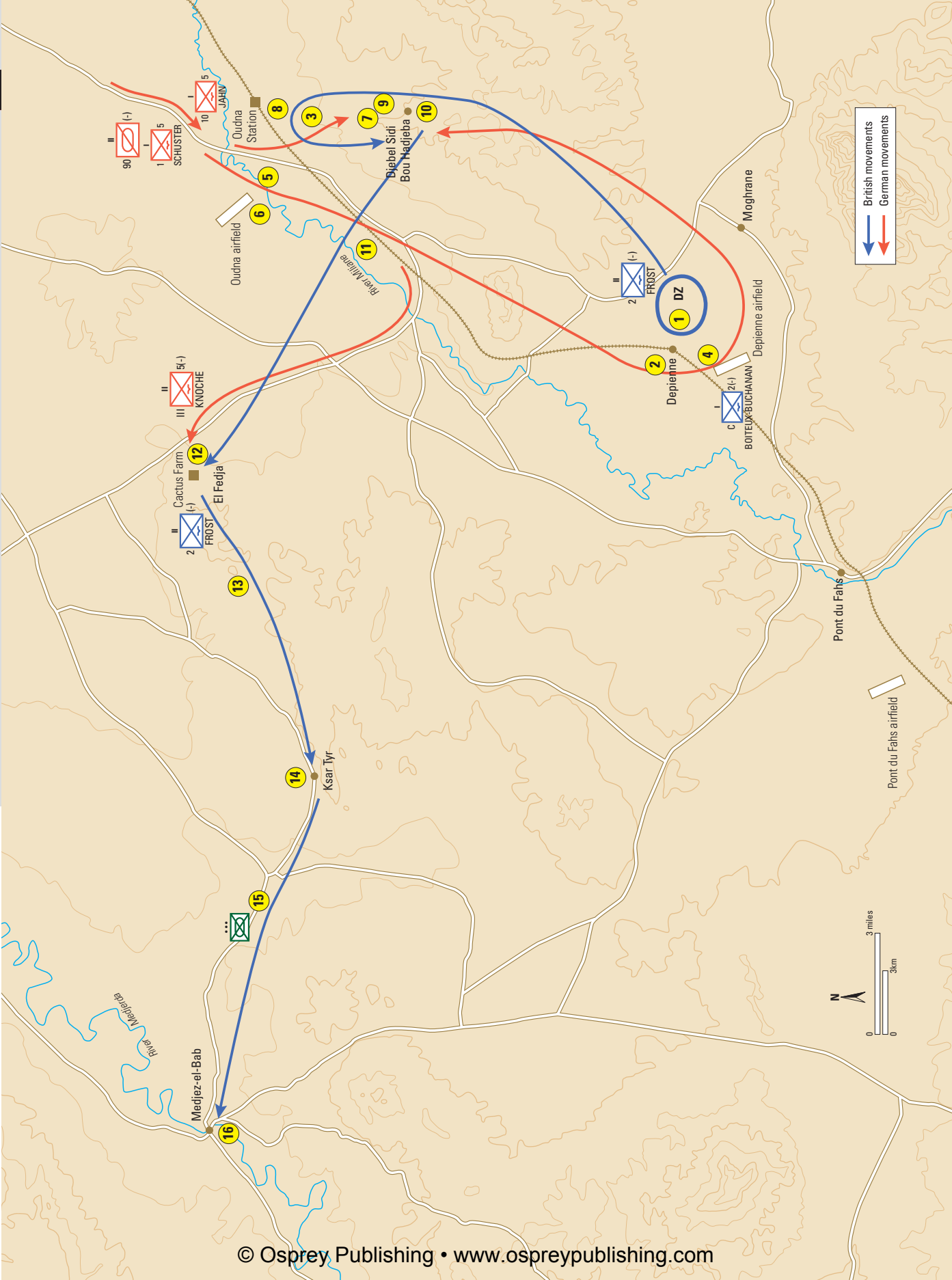
Battlefield environment

At Depienne, even before the rains arrived, movement was difficult. Lt Peter Stainforth of 1st Parachute Squadron, RE, described 'a desolate world of saw-tooth ridges and scar like ravines, hills, valleys, peaks and spurs, all heaped together in a chaos of earth and rock ... after the warmth of colour and rich fertility of Algeria, this fizzled landscape looked a desert' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 301); during the march to Oudna the track disappeared and the men were 'floundering and slipping at every step'. Sgt Alan Johnstone of A Company, 2nd Parachute Battalion, described how the next night's march down from the hills was 'very tough and when we got down on the plain it was no better. I do not exaggerate when I talk of the agony of stumbling in a vineyard. It was like marching over a coal heap ... I was so exhausted I was staggering' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 138).

Throughout 2nd Parachute Battalion's ordeal in November–December 1942, conditions were ideal for the movement of armour and motorized forces. Frost was duly concerned and sought to move as fast as he could, mostly at night, and take

advantage of high ground. He found possession of buildings and occupying the reverse slopes of hills essential for a successful defence.

Arabs were apparently accommodating to both sides. According to Witzig they provided plenty of information and 'enthusiastically received' him (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 132). A German source states how an Arab told Major Knoche that Frost had occupied Cactus Farm. Frost also found them co-operative, describing the owner of the farm as considerate and helpful, telling him where the nearest Allied troops were, and he thought exaggerating the strength of his unit when informing Knoche about his presence. Unsurprisingly, French colonial farmers were friendly to the Allies. Lt Dennis Rendell, OC No. 1 Platoon, A Company, 2nd Parachute Battalion, described an occasion when his group had taken refuge in 'a farm run by French settlers'; three Germans turned up, 'spoke at length to the French family then departed' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 79).





British paratroopers retrieve their weapons (except Stens and pistols carried on the person) from arms containers on exercise. At Depienne some fell the other side of a deep gully; Lt Stainforth and Spr Maddon of 1st Parachute Squadron, RE, dragged theirs out from 'among the reeds, lying half under water in the stream' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 303). Technical innovations were made that would be put into action in Sicily: jumps were carried out with 'brens and rifles actually attached to our legs' by unserviceable parachute rigging lines (Frost 1980: 173). (Cody Images)

Not until midday did the aircraft start to taxi, and another hour was spent forming up before heading off for Tunisia. Before take-off, intelligence came through that German aircraft were not using Depienne or Pont du Fahs, so a new plan was hastily improvised – a drop on Depienne followed by an approach march to Oudna where German aircraft were still thought to be based.

At 1400 the men dropped; however, because the landings were dispersed over an area 1½ miles wide and ½ mile deep, Frost took the remaining two hours of daylight to gather his men. (There had been 15–20 injuries and Boiteux-Buchanan with his two remaining sections was told to stay with them at Depienne and collect the parachutes). The accumulated delays necessitated a night march to reach Oudna. To carry the heavy equipment, Stainforth wrote, 'a wonderful array of carts, donkeys and mules had been added to our cavalcade; and onto these we bundled our heavy explosive and incendiary packs, our mortars, anti-tank rifles and wireless sets' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 304). Pte Les Schurmer of C Company thought it a motley collection, with the column looking more like a travelling circus rather than a fighting formation. Progress was slow because, as Frost reported, 'the track ... was very steep and rough in parts' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 62), and between midnight and 0500 on Monday 30 November, only 8 miles were covered.

After a break the battalion continued on and by 1100 finally deployed on low hills overlooking Oudna airfield; only one damaged aircraft could be seen, but Frost still decided to attack to deny its use to the enemy. At 1315 Ashford's A Company made a direct approach with other companies moving around the flanks and at 1430 experienced desultory machine-gun and mortar fire from a nearby ridgeline, but soon drove off the few Germans present on the position. At 1630 Bf 109 fighters made an appearance and machine-gunned



Here Cpl Gavin Cadden of Lt Boiteux-Buchanan's platoon is being questioned at Depienne by Hauptmann Jungwirth, commander of I. Bataillon/Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5, who along with Oberstleutnant Koch was on a scouting mission in an armoured car to judge the scale of the British landing force. (Airborne Assault Museum, Duxford)

the paratroopers, but their Denison smocks were indistinguishable from the scrub and few casualties were inflicted. Lt Andrew Young of C Company was wounded and indicated *Fallschirmjäger* were present: 'During one of the low level passes made by the Me 109s I was shot in the right leg and later captured by a Romanian soldier of the German Fallschirmjäger' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 299).

Shortly after this aerial attack, five German armoured vehicles hiding underneath a Roman viaduct made a brief foray. Lt Dennis Rendell, OC No. 1 Platoon, A Company, prepared to use a Gammon grenade against an armoured car that was approaching an ambush position he had set up on the airfield and 'was trying to think what I must do if the bloody thing stopped close to us. Luckily it didn't and drove by about 50 yds in front of us' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 77). Suffering a lack of infantry support the German armour pulled back, but their presence made Frost withdraw during darkness to high ground at Prise de L'Eau. Another concern was ammunition; even during the air attack he ordered that the enemy aircraft were not to be fired at. Overall though, despite his signallers' inability to contact First Army, Frost was not overly worried and expected relief the following day.

Young recalled how he heard later that after Boiteux-Buchanan's men at Depienne were quickly overwhelmed by Italian troops:

A jeep carrying a high ranking German officer approached [thought to be the commander of Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 90 of 10. Panzer-Division] and he ordered the Italians to shoot the paras. They were lined up against a wall and were about to be shot when an armoured car pulled up. A commander of a German *Fallschirmjäger* (Parachute Regiment) got out of the car and had an angry

discussion with the high-ranking officer. The commander eventually turned to the paratroopers and told them that they were prisoners of war and would be treated as such – he basically saved their lives. (Quoted in Cherry 2011: 298)

The commander was Oberstleutnant Koch.

The next morning, Tuesday 1 December, on high ground south of Oudna, Frost received a wireless message from First Army HQ informing him that the armoured thrust on Tunis had been postponed. He expected the Germans to attack him with lorried infantry and tanks from both directions but, despite realizing his position was precarious, remained optimistic: 'For the moment my own position was fairly secure, we were in positions for all round defence, we had water and I was confident that we could hold out against anything but a full scale attack from a force of all arms' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 67). However, Frost was 30–40 miles away from where he knew there were Allied troops, and planned on a fighting withdrawal over the plains by night. For the moment he laid an ambush at the foot of the hillocks near a small well, and his men dug foxholes and shell-scrapes.

Initial *Fallschirmjäger* forays sought to establish Frost's position. At 1000 from the north along a track in the valley, Frost reported, came 'a small column of 2 tanks, 2 armoured cars, and 2 lorries' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 67). A party of British paratroopers filling their water bottles were surprised by the German probe. When elements of Oberleutnant Jahn's Nr. 10 Kompanie with three armoured cars out in front carrying riders approached, the lead vehicle's commander was killed and it stopped; the *Fallschirmjäger* on the other vehicles quickly dismounted and those advancing on foot took cover. Jahn ordered his men into the assault and, assisted by the remaining vehicles, they moved forward in bounds either side of the road; however, when Jahn fell, the attack soon collapsed. The Germans retreated to a distance of 2,000yd and shelled the British positions with mortars, with which weapon the British also replied.

Maj Ross's C Company, facing south, also reported approaching forces, consisting of two tanks and an armoured car that were displaying yellow triangles indicating they were Allied. A sergeant went up to them but was captured – the symbols had been taken by the Germans near Depienne and now in an act of subterfuge were being displayed by the German vehicles. Because of armoured support the *Fallschirmjäger* probably felt there was no hope for the British position in the long term and tried to bluff them into surrendering immediately. They asked for Frost's capitulation using their prisoner as an intermediary, citing the fact that Frost was now surrounded. When told no surrender would be forthcoming, the Germans retreated and started shelling. Somewhat light-heartedly, Schurmer described the whole engagement in straightforward terms: 'Tea was just on the boil when up bowled three tanks and started shelling us. Our mortars got onto them after a bit and they sheered off. Then three others turned up from the other direction' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 86–87).

With an encirclement threatening, at 1200 Frost moved south-west to higher ground; the men were in position by 1430 having covered about 3 miles over steep terrain. Mules were of no use and their loads were left behind – as mortar ammunition had all been used up the mortar tubes were destroyed, as were the wireless sets that were simply too heavy to carry. The wounded were left with an escort from B Company. In the heat of the day the men became exhausted and were suffering from a lack of water. They were not in good physical condition after being cooped up on sea transports for 14 days. Still, the northern slopes of Sidi Bou Hadjeba were reached and a well was found, and the men took up positions on two summits – B Company on the left and the remnants of C Company on the right – with A Company in reserve.

By the afternoon Koch had positioned sufficient forces in the valley to make an advance into the Tunisian hills, supported by armoured vehicles from Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 90, viable. At 1500 Frost observed activity on



In Tunisia *Fallschirmjäger* inspect a captured Thompson submachine gun. *Fallschirmjäger* were particularly fond of foreign-made weapons and were taught how to operate many of them during basic training. Other favourites included the Italian 9mm Beretta Modello 38 submachine gun and the 9mm FN Browning P-35 pistol. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-788-0009-08A, Foto: Wörner)

the plain – ‘enemy lorried infantry ... half tracked vehicles, tanks were also seen and our positions were shelled and mortared’ (Frost 1980: 90). To avoid incoming direct fire and to keep out of sight of German armour the British occupied reverse-slope positions. Soon Rendell ‘could clearly hear the revving of tank motors as they ascended ... a most frightening sound ... and from my forward slope position the first thing I saw was the swinging radio mast, then the turret and finally the whole vehicle painted yellow’ (quoted in Peatling 2004: 78). In this instance Gammons were not required because the vehicle veered off, but when another was heard Rendell and one other soldier ran to the ridgeline to prepare to engage it, which ‘on these scrub covered hills was difficult enough, but when also high parachute boots and those awful gaiters were included it was very nearly impossible’ (quoted in Peatling 2004: 78). The men positioned themselves well but no tank materialized. Elsewhere, where Pte Mike Lewis was stationed, armoured cars with *Fallschirmjäger* in support were engaged:

... about a 100 yds away an armoured car came over the hill. I was carrying the grenade launcher. I fired a grenade and it just dropped in front of us. I put in another grenade and fired, it exploded behind the armoured car and landed among the Germans moving behind it. It had an immediate effect; they started to withdraw. I only had a limited number of grenades. (Quoted in Thompson 2011: 263)

A Boys AT rifle had also been deployed, but the crew were wounded before the weapon could be fired. In total, Frost reported, two tanks were knocked out by AT rifle and Gammon bombs and two others immobilized.

At 1700 the *Fallschirmjäger* should have benefited from air support as Bf 109 fighters flew overhead; however, Frost explained how although ‘they were seen diving and opening fire on enemy locations [destroying two armoured cars], not once did they fire at any of our positions. Towards dusk the attack tailed off, the shelling ceased and the enemy appeared to withdraw’ (quoted in Peatling 2004: 68). With this vital breathing space and under cover of the approaching darkness he was on the move again. Pte Lewis admitted the action had been a close-run thing and thought that ‘night came and saved us’ (quoted in Thompson 2011: 263).

Frost decided to move west to Massicault in company parties. The way down to the plain was much steeper and traversing ploughed land made for uncomfortable ankles. The men were given 10 minutes’ rest per hour. Keeping them together was difficult because there was no moon. Koch’s men appeared reluctant to pursue at night and did not interfere. The River Miliane was crossed but Massicault could not be reached before daylight so Frost laid up in a dry wadi and sent a reconnaissance party ahead under Lt Euan Charteris, the battalion intelligence officer. Charteris discovered a farm called El Fedja on the southern slope of a gentle rise surrounded by a cactus hedge ‘as effective as barbed wire’ where ‘there was plenty of cover, abundant water and fairly solid buildings’ (Frost 1980: 90). This farm would be known as Cactus Farm to

the British. The crest of the nearby hill made for an excellent observation post. At 1200 on Wednesday 2 December, A Company appeared, having moved from another farm close by. Arabs told them the nearest Allied troops were 6 miles away at Furna, so Charteris was sent out again to establish contact.

Fallschirmjäger from Knoche's III. Bataillon/Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 were on the scent again. Frost later recalled that at 1330 'a column of armoured cars was seen moving slowly to the south about 2 miles away' but did not come up to the farm; at 1400 'enemy infantry were observed setting up machine guns and mortars behind a ridge to the north' but 'were a long time in starting unpleasantness and seemed to be taking a lot of care' (Frost 1980: 95). Frost's approach was 'to conserve every single round of ammunition and had none to spare for the rather fleeting targets that their little groups presented. We remained silent and showed ourselves not at all. Perhaps this misled them; it certainly seemed to mystify them and it may be that the Arabs had given them an exaggerated idea of our strength' (Frost 1980: 95).

According to Schurmer, those at the farm 'just lay doggo for we had very little ammunition left, and the idea was to wait until they came in close'; he thought that 'Jerry was puzzled by the quiet, and kept his distance' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 87). Rendell was equally worried; his No. 1 Platoon, A Company 'were given the task of defending the northern part of the farm perimeter, which consisted of a big cactus hedge interspersed with stone walls enclosing an olive orchard'; however, he was 'greatly concerned about the shortage of ammunition; despite economy we had wasted a large number of rounds by firing at too great a range' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 79).

Frost thought Charteris might have got through, and for now decided to remain in place. At 1500 Knoche's men started firing mortars at the farm and opened up with machine guns, but foxholes and secure buildings offered sufficient protection for the British paratroopers. Then a German patrol approached, described by Schurmer as 'a section to find out what we were up to' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 87). Rendell's men waited until point-blank range before opening up with a devastating fire. Leutnant Johann Ismer, the officer who had volunteered to lead this patrol, was killed. He was the battalion adjutant and a personal friend of Knoche, and perhaps wanted to prove himself.

Stung into action by this probe and with dusk approaching, Frost described how German 'machine gun fire became more intense'; however, 'most of it was very high, so much so that we thought Allied units were on the hills to the south' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 69). Lack of ammunition was a serious concern for Frost: 'we had not sufficient ammunition left to fight another battle. And I estimated that the enemy were approximately 4 to 1 stronger in numbers [a probable exaggeration, as there would not have been a full battalion opposing him]. Lt Charteris had not returned so I presumed that we were still a long way from other British forces' (Frost 1980: 96). A *Fallschirmjäger* patrol led by Leutnant Schuster had in fact captured Charteris; he was flown from Tunis to Italy for questioning, but never arrived





The fight at Cactus Farm



British view: Rendell's No. 1 Platoon, A Company was stationed in the north-eastern corner of the orchard, which had to be held to enable an unimpeded withdrawal. Rendell recalled how 'by now the light was beginning to fade, and various farm buildings were on fire; most of them had straw roofs. By dark the fires gave off a ghostly light which, combined with the smoke, made accurate shooting virtually impossible, and this was very worrying because we could hear Germans very close' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 80). With the coming of darkness *Fallschirmjäger* steadily closed in on his position. Rendell wrote how their presence had been noticed:

'... Keith [Mountford – the battalion 2ic] again arrived, to tell me we were moving out when it became dark ... I walked along the cactus hedge with Keith towards Coy HQ. We heard German voices on the other side; pistols were useless, and in any case it was nearly dark, so after a frenzied debate decided to use our Mills grenades. In the approved fashion we hurled two grenades each over the fence in the direction of the voices. They burst with satisfying crumps ... Keith and I got up from our prone positions. "Good evening to you Mr Rendell," he said, and disappeared. I returned to Platoon HQ and briefed the NCOs on the plan' (Quoted in Peatling 2004: 80).



German view: As dusk approached, the Germans sent a patrol forward to test the British defences. With the British having been under heavy fire for most of the afternoon and showing little response, the Germans may have considered the British position weaker than they had initially thought. Whether intentional or not, the German patrol approached along the planned British route of withdrawal, and the chances of achieving surprise were low.

A German section is seen here cautiously approaching at 1800, close to where Frost sought to make his withdrawal

at 1815. A German MG 42 gunner, thinking his section has not been detected, is positioning his section's light machine gun to fire into the hedge, while the rifle group, led by a *Feldwebel* with MP 40, prepares to move up. After the earlier German probe had been decimated by point-blank fire, the *Fallschirmjäger* section commander must have been cautious and perhaps was acting on his own initiative. It is inconceivable that he was making a serious attempt to assault the farm and may have presumed that a British withdrawal was likely, considering the fires now taking hold in some of the outbuildings.

because his plane was shot down en route. During the afternoon Frost, aware that a withdrawal would be necessary,

... had been watching and plotting all enemy movement ... there seemed to be one place where there was considerably less than elsewhere. Very fortunately this was in the direction we wanted to go, being on the route into the hills leading to Furna. The Germans, although originally encircling us, were now rather more concentrated on the eastern side with their rear towards Tunis. (Frost 1980: 96)

One German machine-gun position had been stationed along the intended withdrawal route – west, then north through the hayricks – but at 1600 moved after firing a number of bursts at the farm.

Frost's plan was for groups to pass through battalion HQ and form up in a long column with the men at its head ready to make an assault. When he blew his horn 'we would all stream past the farmhouse door, through the cactus and over the hill'. He recalled how 'heavy fire had already forced our picket off the high ground above the farm ... and a burning building was producing smoke and embers which were not only distracting to the defenders, but were also making quite an effective smokescreen for an enemy attack' (Frost 1980: 97). When 'towards dusk the enemy became very bold and a party with two officers [one being Ismer] approached within 5 yards of the cactus hedge surrounding the orchard ... they were killed with grenades and Sten fire ... this furore drew attention to the fact that the enemy were much too close for comfort' (Frost, quoted in Peatling 2004: 70). Frost decided that 'in the breathing space thus given, it was time for us to go' (Frost 1980: 97).

The escape from the farm was assisted by Rendell's platoon, which repelled a German probe near where the retreat was conducted. This provided only a temporary respite for Rendell, who soon after 'heard the whine of mortar bombs falling very close. My sole recollection is of a ghastly smell of sulphur' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 80). He was wounded by the blast and soon captured, as the Germans occupied the farm immediately after Frost's withdrawal was complete. During the retreat 'the first parties came out at a gallop and were directed towards a large haystack which had been selected as a landmark ... the leading parties met no opposition' (Frost 1980: 97), but once clear of the farm it was difficult to collect everyone in the dark. The wounded were straggling and the column broke up. Frost sounded his horn to signal a rendezvous but only 110 of 200 were collected – mostly from A and HQ Companies. Charteris had not returned so Furna was dropped as a destination and replaced by Medjez-el-Bab. At midnight a halt was made for one hour. At 0300 on Thursday 3 December, Frost's column stumbled into the other ahead of him under Capt Vernon, and at 0500 a farm was used for a short sleep and breakfast was served by a French hostess. Locals provided the news of an approaching German column on the look-out for them so a hasty evacuation was made. 20 miles still separated the British from their destination. The terrain was flat but olive groves provided some cover.



The capture of key strategic terrain was the paratrooper's *raison d'être*; however, after the fiasco at Oudna their specialist role would temporarily take a back seat, and deployment as 'fire brigade' units to fill a gap in the line or to lead an attack came to take precedence. Here British paratroopers in Tunisia march under an old Roman viaduct set against a background of rolling hills. (Cody Images)

At noon on high ground near Ksar Tyr the men took cover as three armoured cars approached around a road junction before taking the road for Tunis. After another 2 miles some armoured halftracks were seen moving across undulating countryside; this time they were identified as American. Frost hailed them down and with some wounded took a lift back to Medjez-el-Bab, held by French colonial troops, to report the presence of his unit and organize evacuation by motor transport; the remnants of his battalion reached Medjez-el-Bab on Friday 4 December. Frost found out about the battle that had been raging at Terbourba and took some solace in the fact that he had drawn off some German fighters. The price was heavy, however – over 300 casualties (only 180 men with 100 rounds of ammunition between them made it back) and left his opponents bemused. General der Panzertruppe Nehring described the operation as 'too small an operation to be readily explained' (quoted in Rolf 2001: 55).

Green Hill

5 January 1943

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

After the disastrous Oudna operation, First Army decided to use 1st Parachute Brigade in the ground role under command of Lt-Gen Charles Allfrey's V Corps. Allied strategy called for a quick resolution to the Tunisian campaign in order to make a landing on the European mainland possible by spring 1943. However, the Germans benefited from their central position, access to all-weather airfields and, with short sea-lanes of communication to Sicily and readily available land-transport routes to the front, few supply difficulties.

In late 1942, after the planned Axis landing on Malta was cancelled, Witzig's *Fallschirm-Pioniere* prepared for a deployment to North Africa. In July Oberleutnant Cord Tietjen's Nr. 2 Kompanie of Witzig's Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 11 had been posted there, and on 10 November the rest of the battalion was following, mostly via Greece, when, as Witzig recalled, 'orders were changed and my battalion landed with many other different units, from South Italy and Athens, by plane at Bizerta' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 124). On 15 November Oberleutnant Ernst's Nr. 1 Kompanie plus signals and headquarters personnel flew on six-engined BV 222 flying boats from Piraeus via Trapani to Bizerta, with the two other companies soon following in Ju 52 aircraft.

On 18 November 1942 Witzig's unit was subordinated to Division Broich in northern Tunisia. Broich kept Nr. 3 Kompanie/Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 11 in reserve for parachute and sabotage missions and moved Nr. 1 Kompanie and Oberleutnant Hart's Nr. 4 Kompanie west to Djebel Azzag – known to the British as Green Hill – which overlooked the main road.

For the Germans, holding Green Hill was vital in order to maintain control over the highway to Tunis. By late November two of Witzig's companies were part of a larger *Kampfgruppe* under his command, including artillery and armour. On 29 November, when 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders attacked, 'eleven light tanks [actually Universal Carriers] were destroyed [and] approximately two companies were dispersed' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 135). However over three days, after 36th Infantry Brigade committed another battalion, Witzig's command suffered 200 casualties – including Gefreiter Bohn, who was captured.

The fighting continued into the New Year. When on 3 January 36th Infantry Brigade penetrated the right wing of the Djefna position under cover of heavy artillery fire, Witzig reported that 'the enemy was sitting behind our right flank with infantry and artillery' and described how 'as a result the battalion moved into position and took over command of the *Kampfgruppe*' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 141–42). Because Nr. 3 Kompanie was still in reserve and Nr. 2 Kompanie was still returning from Libya, Witzig had to rely on Nr. 1 and Nr. 4 Kompanien. The weather was very bad, with heavy rain making roads and tracks virtually impassable to wheeled vehicles, so no armoured support from other units of the *Kampfgruppe* was available. However, Witzig's defensive positions benefited from the specialist skills of his *Pioniere*, and were fortified with machine-gun posts, barbed wire, booby traps and mines.

On Sunday 3 January Lt-Col R.G. Pine-Coffin's 3rd Parachute Battalion arrived at Alouna railway station, tasked with assaulting the Green Hill position. There were two high points on Green Hill, designated Furze Hill and Point 396. Pine-Coffin and OC A Company, Maj S. Terrell, were immediately briefed by the CO 5th Buffs, the battalion from 36th Infantry Brigade that had been trying to take the positions, about the attack planned for that night. However, Terrell's role was only to move onto the western slope of Green Hill to support the main attack, which was to be carried out by B Company under Maj David Dobie.

For some reason Dobie was not present at the briefing and he later complained that he had no idea 'what the ground was like nor where the enemy posts were situated' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 319), as it was 'impossible to make any recce or even see the ground approach' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 315). The men of 3rd Parachute Battalion's C Company were not committed to the attack because they were expected to attack nearby Bald Hill the following day; instead, they remained behind in an unpleasant railway culvert.

In appalling weather the scene was set for the second engagement between the airborne forces, in which two companies of Witzig's *Fallschirm-Pioniere* would face a determined night-time attack by elements of 3rd Parachute Battalion. However, as the historian Rick Atkinson would write, the Green Hill position was to remain 'as impregnable in fact as Eben Emael had been in reputation' (Atkinson 2004: 213).

INTO COMBAT

At 1800 (about 45 minutes after sunset), because of torrential rain, Terrell received orders postponing the attack by 24 hours. The delay allowed him to carry out a reconnaissance and watch artillery observers registering targets on both hills (something that presumably Dobie could also have done if he had been aware of B Company's involvement). At 2100 Terrell moved forward from the railway tunnel to take up position at the foot of Green Hill, but it was not until 0730 on Monday 4 January that all the platoons arrived, at which point the CO 5th Buffs ordered them to the western end of the hill. By 1115 A Company was in position on the lower slopes. During the day Terrell was informed of a change in plan; an attack at 1415 on Point 396 was to go in preceded by an artillery barrage, but this was cancelled and at 1900 the night attack was confirmed.

Information from a German prisoner captured that day indicated that one company was defending the hill at the eastern end. Dobie received this information, but said he heard only at 1745 of B Company's role in the attack. He expected 'the enemy had one company 180 strong supported by 4 inch [likely 8.1cm] mortars and machine guns – enemy were parachutists'; however, he thought his intelligence 'very sketchy' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 315). He hastily made a plan to 'climb hill northwards ... to northern ridge then swing eastwards to find enemy's right flank: Approach as near as possible under barrage, which was from 0030 to 0100' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 315–16). He did not transmit his worries to his junior officers. Lt Derrick Bentham, OC No. 5 Platoon, wrote optimistically of his expectations for the night's work: 'We stood at the bottom of Green Hill and listened to the CO [Dobie] while he explained our job and gave us the necessary information. It all seemed simple and I felt rather sorry for the Germans waiting at the top. We reckoned on a few machine guns in trenches and it seemed we should soon overpower these' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 160). He wrote how 'at 11 o'clock we started up the hill and by 12.30 we were waiting about 400 yds from the enemy, while the artillery put down a 30 minute barrage for us. When it lifted we got up and advanced' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 160).

The company, with a fighting strength of only 90 men, moved off at 0100 on Tuesday 5 January in the following order: Lt William Blewitt's No. 6 Platoon, Company HQ, No. 4 Platoon, then Bentham's No. 5 Platoon. In the dark there was also a danger of friendly fire, with A Company's fire support falling 'close to us', according to Dobie (quoted in Cherry 2011: 316). Terrell had been told to assist Dobie by firing at the right flank of Point 396 from 0100; at 0130 Terrell 'heard small arms firing and assumed B Company's attack was going

Here a German paratrooper is liaising with Arabs in Tunisia. The Germans made use of information provided by sympathetic Arabs and Witzig even recruited 20 to his battalion. (Cody Images)



3rd Parachute Battalion and Kampfgruppe 'Witzig', Green Hill, 4–5 January 1943

- 1 Morning, 4 January:** Terrell's A Company, 3rd Parachute Battalion moves onto lower slopes of Jebel Azzag.
- 2 0100hrs, 5 January:** Dobie's B Company, 3rd Parachute Battalion moves forward from start line on broad front after 30-minute artillery barrage.
- 3 0110hrs, 5 January:** German machine-gun positions at D, H, G and A open fire; Dobie changes his plan to an envelopment around the left flank, led by No. 6 Platoon, followed by No. 4 Platoon and HQ Platoon, and then No. 5 Platoon, from positions Q, P and O respectively.
- 4 0145hrs, 5 January:** British attacks commence. No. 6 Platoon quickly captures A and B, but is held in front of C.
- 5 0245hrs, 5 January:** L/Cpl Hillyard-Todd takes D and Sgt Copling neutralizes E and F.
- 6 0300hrs, 5 January:** Sgt Baynes captures G and H that had pinned down No. 5 Platoon.
- 7 0315hrs, 5 January:** First German counter-attack by 80 men from Point 396, supported by machine-gun fire, makes some progress and captures D, but retires in the face of Dobie's bayonet assault.
- 8 0330hrs, 5 January:** Dobie, with 30 men remaining, faces a better-organized second German counter-attack supported by creeping barrage from mortars, which forces him to withdraw at 0345hrs.
- 9 0400hrs, 5 January:** B Company regains start line.

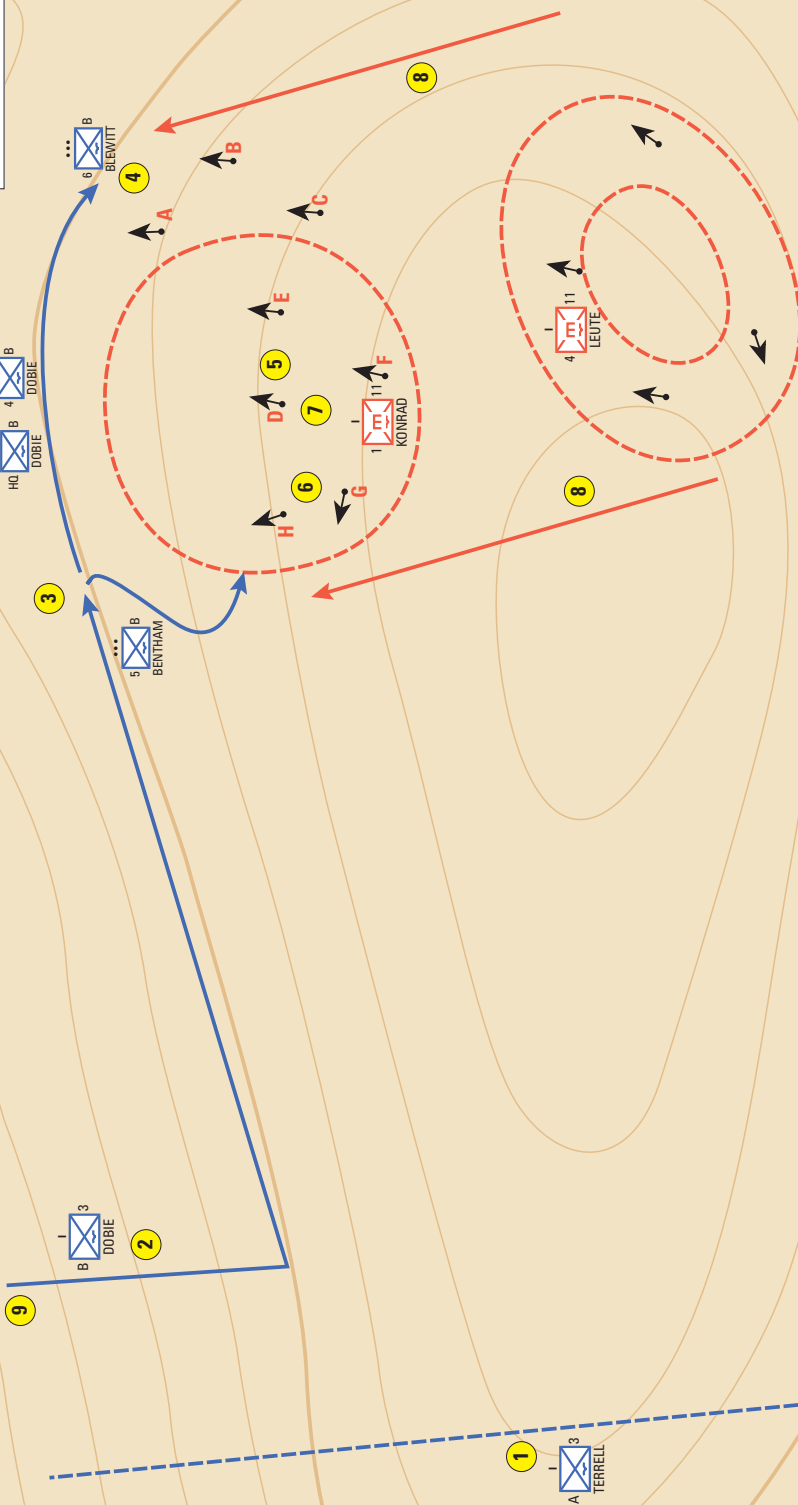
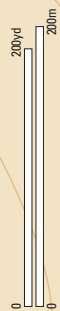
Battlefield environment

To hold and capture vital areas of high ground, which were so difficult to assault during daylight hours, paratroopers rather than heavily equipped infantry were ideal. While at times paratroopers could be given responsibility for an area of front, using them in such a way exposed them to attrition, especially from artillery fire used to soften up targets before an assault. The Germans could rarely afford to pull their airborne troops out of the line, but the British were more fortunate in this respect. However, moving the Airborne between different sectors did not always give them a chance to familiarize themselves with the terrain before being required to conduct an attack. Maj Terrell, OC A Company, noted how on the lower western slope 'digging in [was]

very difficult because of the rocky nature of the ground' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 314). When the barrage ceased at 0100 Dobie reported: 'Worked forward. Going was worst possible, very thick scrub making silence impossible. Night darkest possible' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 316). Capt Alan Bush, 2ic of C Company, described how 'Green Hill and the other known as Bald Hill, completely dominated the valley through which the road twisted and the enemy had fortified them strongly. We were expected to wait until Green Hill had been captured and then to help in the attack on Bald Hill. The attack looked unpleasant, for little cover seemed available to troops advancing up the hills' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 163).

In Tunisia in winter, when the rains turned the fields into mud and made cross-country movement difficult, high mountains dominated the few main roads. Well-placed machine-gun posts could command fields of fire to dominate the valleys and make daylight movement difficult. However, because formations were widely dispersed with battalions sometimes 20 miles apart, infiltration by small units on foot was still possible at night. (IWM NA 3111)





in'. At 200yd from the German positions, four British artillery rounds fell within 20–30yd of No. 6 Platoon. Hearing the British approach, four *Fallschirmjäger* machine-gun positions opened up on their right flank ten minutes later. This German response prompted a British change of plan: Blewitt's No. 6 Platoon was ordered to advance on the left, Bentham's No. 5 Platoon on the right and Company HQ and No. 4 Platoon in the centre.

At 0145 on the right flank No. 6 Platoon's OC, Lt W. Blewitt, plus Sgt Kerr and two privates, crept up on a heavy machine-gun post, which was successfully neutralized with grenades. Two further machine guns then opened up at almost point-blank range – 20yd. Blewitt was killed and Kerr, although wounded, managed to throw a grenade that destroyed one of the positions. No advance could be made on the other gun pit because of lack of cover and the whole of No. 6 Platoon could make no further progress, pinned down by one of Witzig's well-positioned machine-gun nests.

The German tactic of not opening up with all their machine guns was repeated in the sector allocated to Bentham's No. 5 Platoon. When one emplaced machine gun started to fire it was soon neutralized, but a further four also commenced firing and caught the platoon in the open. There were a number of casualties and many British paratroopers were pinned down; only Bentham with one other man gained higher ground, but just the two of them could not take the advance any further forwards.

In the centre the men of No. 4 Platoon, which had no officer in charge but had Company HQ under Dobie with them, were targeted by a *Fallschirmjäger* machine-gun post at Position D, 40yd away. Although a Boys

Unlike their British counterparts *Fallschirmjäger* were prolifically equipped with general-purpose machine guns such as the MG 34 seen here. On Djebel Azzag, Witzig based each of his defensive positions around them and British paratroopers exhibited great personal bravery in storming such positions. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-569-1584-35, Foto: Seeger, Erwin)



ATR group was sent forward, it suffered casualties and could not make progress. On his own initiative L/Cpl Hillyard Todd went around the right flank; crawling forward, he detected an iron covering and small slit openings through which tracer rounds were emanating. He slipped a grenade through an aperture, silencing the machine gun. At 0245 Dobie moved his Company HQ to this position.

The advance of the centre column then resumed. Another machine gun opened up from Position E, 30yd away. Dobie designated Sgt Copling with two men to deal with it, which was successfully accomplished, and they went on to deal with another position, F, despite Copling receiving a wound in the head. Taking these positions was becoming more hazardous; as Dobie explained, the *Fallschirmjäger* 'started to mortar us, they were also using hand grenades in large numbers' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 317). However, with Dobie in charge, Positions G and H were dealt with by Sgt Baynes's section. By 0300 only one remained on Furze Hill (Position C, which had held up No. 6 Platoon), but because as Dobie stated this was 'extremely well sited with all-round protection and contained a heavy and light machine gun and several riflemen' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 317), it could not be taken.

Fire from Point 396 continued and German mortar rounds started to land near Position D, described by Dobie as 'a sunken post with only slit openings and an iron roof' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 317). He could not make radio contact with anyone and he gave the order to dig in. A German counter-attack soon followed; approximately 80 Germans, apparently chanting, made an impromptu advance, which gained some ground. Dobie organized a response: 'regaining the line by a bayonet charge, Sten, grenades and covered by light machine guns, the enemy broke and retired leaving approx 20 casualties' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 319). Dobie had only 30 effectives with him, however, and Nos 5 and 6 Platoons were cut off.

Dobie thought 'the first counterattack was obviously not planned'. Then soon after 0330 Leutnant Leute's Nr. 4 Kompanie launched a better-organized attack, which 'was a masterpiece ... 2in mortars in support [actually, probably 8cm mortars] took part' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 319). He described how the *Fallschirmjäger* attempted to turn both flanks before another group made an advance up the middle, cause for concern as 'the three Bren guns I had left had practically run out of ammunition, there were no grenades left and practically all the Sten gun ammunition was exhausted', however 'we managed to use one German machine gun which was conveniently situated' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 319). He realized that maintaining his position against this onslaught was impossible and at 0345 ordered B Company to retire in section bounds. The men regained the start line at 0400 then a further retreat took them back to headquarters at 0600. Dobie's casualties were one officer and four other ranks killed, with nine other ranks wounded and nine missing.

On the western side of the hill, Terrell's A Company still remained in position and was vulnerable; perhaps because with the coming of daylight (at about 0730), retreating safely was not feasible. Later that morning,



In Tunisia Witzig would give high praise to his men (by mid-January 1943 he had awarded 33 Iron Crosses and asked for 30 more); citing their training, motivation and mission-oriented tactics, he thought they were more experienced in war than their British opponents and that British parachutists held them in high regard. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-634-3900-15, Foto: Nowak)

Terrell recalled, his 'ammunition and ration situation [was] getting serious' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 314). At 1100 three sections were pinned down by machine-gun fire. Closing with these positions in daylight was not a viable option. Lt Elton Tucker and nine others went forward with a Boys ATR but Tucker was wounded and could not be brought back. Instead, at 1200 Terrell arranged a barrage on Point 396, and the German machine-gun fire ceased. For the rest of the day Terrell experienced intermittent mortar fire, which

destroyed a Bren gun and mortar. With the coming of darkness his company provided the rearguard for the retreat of 5th Buffs from around the hill at 2000; after their successful extraction 3rd Parachute Battalion departed the area as quickly as they had arrived, boarding a train for Algeria the following morning.

In his personal papers, Witzig identified the enemy as being from the British Airborne, and noted that the battle for the position was one of the bitterest and hardest-fought infantry combats of the entire campaign. He cited Konrad's Nr. 1 Kompanie as the unit that had 'defeated two night attacks by British airborne troops' (Villahermosa 2010: 142), and Nr. 4 Kompanie as the unit that led the counter-attack, which cost the company its commander, Leutnant Leute. In total the Germans suffered 61 casualties repelling the assault from 3rd Parachute Battalion, including one officer and ten NCOs.

By the middle of January only seven officers remained in Witzig's battalion – two each in Nr. 1, Nr. 2, and Nr. 3 Kompanien and only one in Nr. 4 Kompanie. Even then, some NCOs had been promoted to officer rank to fill the gaps; on 27 January Oberfeldwebel Wenzel, a veteran of Eben Emael, was promoted *Leutnant* and took over Nr. 1 Kompanie. Of the four officer candidates experiencing front-line service, three had been killed and the fourth wounded (Villahermosa 2010: 146). In February, Tietjen's Nr. 2 Kompanie returned from Libya with 50 men in time for Operation *Ochsenkopf* (Ox Head), a German attempt between 26 February and 4 March to expand the Tunisian bridgehead and outflank the British troops further north; Witzig himself led night attacks, for which Generalmajor Hasso von Manteuffel (Brinch's successor) admonished him, especially as Witzig often wore his Meyer cap instead of a helmet, but the effort stalled in front of Sedjenane. Over the next two months his battalion continued to put up a staunch defence, withstanding heavy bombardment; by the end of the Tunisian campaign in May only two officers, four NCOs and 27 enlisted men remained effective.

Primosole Bridge

13–17 July 1943

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

In the event an early Allied victory in the Tunisian campaign proved illusory; the Axis forces managed to hold out until 12 May when, unable to escape to Sicily, Arnim's forces surrendered. The Italian island, a stepping-stone for an invasion of the European mainland, would be the Allies' next target.

Casting his usual cautious, methodical approach aside Montgomery envisaged a decisive operation, exclusively by British forces, to stop the Germans evacuating across the Straits of Messina. This plan depended on the capture by the Airborne of a crude, 400ft long iron-girder structure called Primosole Bridge that spanned the River Simeto 7 miles south of Catania. A ground advance by 50th Infantry Division accompanied by 4th Armoured Brigade would quickly relieve them. According to the official history of British Intelligence in World War II, the mission was based on a solid intelligence picture, since there was 'no lack of SIGINT [signals intelligence], about either the enemy's intentions or the state of affairs at the battlefield' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 330).

The concept appealed to the elite Airborne. A successful, bold assault by an entire brigade would reinvigorate the Airborne forces and validate their elite status. Brigadier Gerald Lathbury, who had replaced Flavell after the Tunisian campaign, designated 1st Parachute Battalion under Lt-Col Alastair Pearson to seize the bridge, 3rd Parachute Battalion (by now commanded by Lt-Col E.C. Yeldman, formerly brigade major) to hold ground to the north, and 2nd Parachute Battalion (Frost) to hold low-lying hills to the south. Another use of elite forces, to assist the relief force, was an amphibious attack

Soldiers of 50th Infantry Division are pictured here marching through Syracuse. On 13 July they were expected to make a 30-mile march across the sun-baked Sicilian countryside in 24 hours. Given that the division lacked motorized transport and had already covered 100 miles in three days since coming ashore on 10 July, this was an ambitious request – and the 69th Infantry Brigade failed to capture the town of Lentini that day. (IWM NA 4480)



by Lt-Col John Durnford-Slater's No. 3 Commando behind enemy lines to seize Malati Bridge over the River Lentini, 10 miles further south, which Durnford-Slater later described as 'one of the worst plans I have ever seen' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 358). On the morning of 13 July Montgomery briefed Maj-Gen Sidney Kirkman, GOC 50th Infantry Division, about the importance of relieving the Airborne the next day.

Generalleutnant Richard Heidrich (right) is seen here with Oberst Ludwig Heilmann (centre), the commander of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3. Heidrich was an experienced paratrooper leader having previously commanded the Fallschirm-Infanterie-Bataillon des Heeres, Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3, 7. Flieger-Division, and 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division. At midnight on 11 July he telephoned Heilmann and told him: 'You will personally reconnoitre the landing zone ... We ourselves don't know what is going on over there. Good luck' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 353–54). (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-577-1920-18, Foto: Zscheile)





When Lt David Cole of the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, with the relief force, arrived on the ridge overlooking the Catania plain 'the panorama before us was magnificent. Thirty miles to the north, dominating the horizon was the huge, misty, snow-capped, conical mass, 10,000 ft high, of Mt Etna ... the Simeto River curling irregularly from the west down to the sea ... a picture of great beauty and tranquillity, had it not been for the thud of shells, with their tell-tale puffs of black smoke, exploding near the river. The reality was that down in front of us, concealed in slit trenches and ditches and sheltered behind buildings and whatever cover they could find, two armies were facing each other in mortal conflict' (Cole 1983: 43–44). (IWM NA 5286)

In the way of the British was Kampfgruppe 'Schmalz', consisting of infantry and armoured elements of Panzer-Division 'Hermann Göring' and 15. Panzergrenadier-Division. Oberst Wilhelm Schmalz of the Luftwaffe, though a competent commander, needed help. Unknown to Montgomery, the German theatre commander, Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, had summoned Generalleutnant Richard Heidrich to Rome and told him his 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division would also deploy to Catania. Heidrich immediately sent Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3, accompanied by Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 1, the signal troops of Nachrichten-Kompanie 1 and three anti-tank platoons (1., 5. and 6. Züge/Fallschirm-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1); *Fallschirm-Pioniere*, further anti-tank units and the other two *Fallschirmjäger* regiments of the division would follow when air transport became available. The third and most decisive engagement in the Mediterranean between the British and German parachute forces would be contested around Primosole Bridge; its outcome would lead the Allied command to question the utility of large-scale airborne operations, but would prompt the Germans to expand their airborne forces as elite infantry and fully justify their value as a mobile, air-transportable strategic reserve.

1st Parachute Battalion and Kampfgruppe 'Stangenberg', Primosole Bridge, 13–17 July 1943

- 1 0215hrs, 14 July:** Capt Rann's 50-strong force captures Primosole Bridge. At 0315hrs Brig Lathbury and HQ 1st Parachute Brigade, plus Lt-Col Pearson and further elements of 1st and 3rd Parachute battalions, arrive at the southern end of Primosole Bridge. A small column of German vehicles approaches the bridge at 0345hrs, but is swiftly despatched by a PIAT and Gammon bombs.
- 2 0315hrs (approx.), 14 July:** Lt Frank's force assaults and captures Johnny I, and is later reinforced by elements of 2nd Parachute Battalion. At 0530hrs, Lt-Col Frost deploys a defence perimeter around the farmhouse at the northern summit of Johnny I.
- 3 0900hrs (approx.), 14 July:** Stangenberg and a group of 20 men in two trucks approach the bridge from the north, but are repulsed by British mortar fire. At 0930hrs, 1st Parachute Battalion makes brief radio contact with 4th Armoured Brigade and passes the success signal, but contact is quickly lost. At 1120hrs, German fighter aircraft machine-gun 1st Parachute Battalion's positions and German shelling commences.
- 4 1310hrs, 14 July:** German ground troops under Stangenberg and Fassl launch an attack against 1st and 3rd Parachute battalions, which repulse the German attack.
- 5 1600hrs, 14 July:** The Germans renew their ground attacks on the bridge, having brought up two self-propelled assault guns. At 1730hrs, Lathbury orders Pearson to abandon the positions north of the bridge and withdraw to the southern bank.
- 6 1830hrs, 14 July:** German forces cross the Simeto 400yd to the east of the bridge; 1st and 3rd Parachute battalions are ordered to commence a withdrawal to 2nd Parachute Battalion's positions, even though Lathbury and Pearson do not know whether Frost's men still hold this position. At 1915hrs, Lathbury orders the bridge to be abandoned.
- 7 1915hrs, 14 July:** Leading elements of 4th Armoured Brigade arrive on the battlefield; the main body of 9th Durham Light Infantry arrived later, at midnight.
- 8 0800hrs, 15 July:** Advance by 9th Durham Light Infantry and 44th Royal Tank Regiment against German positions around the bridge from behind Johnny II is repulsed.
- 9 0100hrs, 16 July:** Pearson guides A and D companies, 8th Durham Light Infantry across the Simeto 400yd further upstream. At dawn, B and C companies of 8th Durham Light Infantry with tank support assault across the bridge and establish a small bridgehead. By 0600hrs, the bridge is in British hands once more.

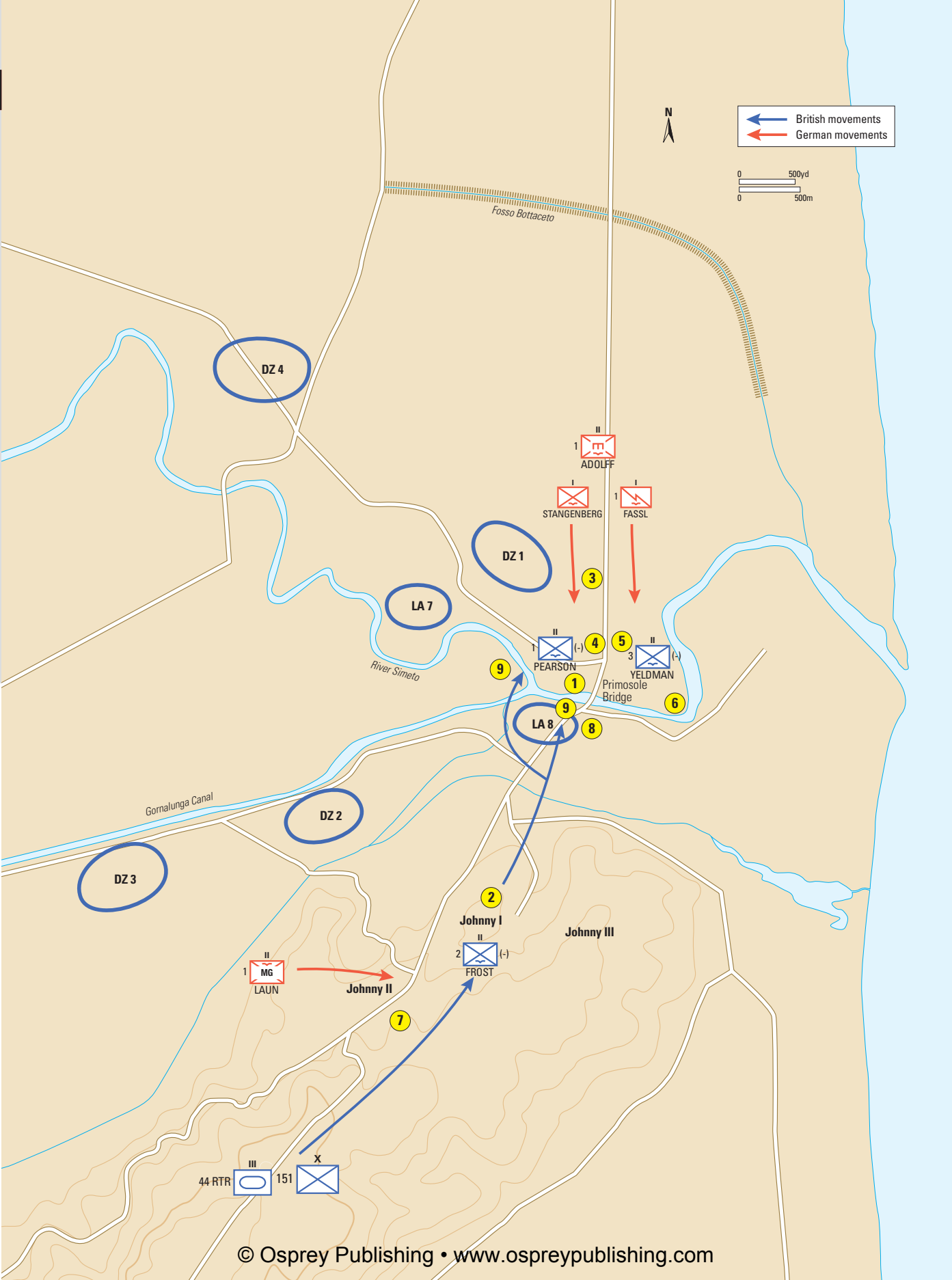
Battlefield environment

The terrain north of Primosole Bridge was beneficial to the defenders. Concrete blockhouses guarded each end. On the northern side of the River Simeto, farm buildings lay close by the bridge and there were rows of vineyards and orchards extending 1,000yd to the east and west; on their northern boundary ran a sunken track and there were numerous other gullies to take cover in. Some 2½ miles north of the bridge, the Fosso Bottaceto, a dry irrigation channel, provided a more substantial obstruction that also had to be crossed before Catania could be reached. In contrast, the southern bank was devoid of cover.

Leutnant Pöppel, situated a couple of miles to the south, later described how: 'A couple of farmsteads are scattered around here, olive groves cast their shadows, and from the little hills you can see far across the flat countryside' (Pöppel 2000: 121). These heights, codenamed Johnny I, II and III, were set as objectives for 2nd Parachute Battalion as they offered the best

prospect for defence – if they remained in German hands the defenders would be able to use their longer-range machine guns more effectively across the open terrain on the lower ground. Leaving the Italians to man positions on the higher ground, the Germans occupied the low-lying farmsteads for protection against air attack and olive groves for concealment; Pöppel wrote how by the evening of 13 July the 'whole farmstead is now excellently camouflaged, with no indication of any military presence' (Pöppel 2000: 121). The following afternoon would be 'hot and atmosphere sultry. Smoke and fumes hung about for a long time' (Frost 1980: 182).

Lt Peter Barry, OC No. 9 Platoon, C Company, 2nd Parachute Battalion, related how 'the ground was rock hard and we could only scrape a few inches from the surface' (quoted in Peatling 2004: 126). Furthermore the long dry grass caught fire and created a smokescreen, which the Germans used to improve their positions.



← British movements
← German movements

0 500yd
0 500m

Fosso Bottaceto

DZ 4

1 II
ADOLFF

1 I
STANGENBERG

1 I
FASSEL

LA 7

River Simeto

II
PEARSON

II
YELDMAN

Primosole Bridge

Gornalunga Canal

DZ 2

DZ 3

1 II
MG
LAUN

Johnny II

Johnny I

2 II
FROST

Johnny III

44 RTR





He 111 aircraft with personnel of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3 on board flew to Sicily unescorted by fighters and just missed interception by USAAF P-38 fighters because low fuel forced the US aircraft to return to base. The men dropped so close together that within 45 minutes they were formed up. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-562-1171-37, Foto: Wahner)

INTO COMBAT

At 0500 on 12 July Oberst Heilmann, accompanied by Hauptmann Franz Stangenberg, an operations officer, and Hauptmann Specht, a logistics officer (both from divisional HQ), arrived at Catania and selected an area among the Catania wheat fields south of Primosole Bridge for the parachute landing of 1,400 men from Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 3. After they landed at 1815 transport, organized by Specht, took them to the front. One battalion was sent further west by Schmalz, but two battalions were moved to Lentini and deployed between here and the coast – directly in the way of the planned Allied approach to Malati Bridge. Despite the Allied intelligence apparatus Heilmann's arrival went unnoticed and Durnford-Slater was told to expect only Italian opposition.

Major Werner Schmidt's Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 1 arrived at Catania at 0815 the following morning. (Catania airfield was bombed shortly afterwards and two Me 321 Gigant aircraft carrying elements of Fallschirm-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1 and I. Abteilung/Fallschirm-Artillerie-Regiment 1 were destroyed on the ground; others had crashed on take off or been lost en route from France to Italy, which would leave the German paratroopers particularly short of anti-tank support).

Relying more on intuition rather than concrete intelligence, Heilmann had prophetically told Schmidt:

... something is bound to happen tonight. The enemy will try to sneak through to the Catania plain, and to do so he'll send in more troops – either by sea or by air. If he manages to land them in our rear and dig in, then we're cut off for sure. So your battalion will remain south of Catania. Hold the bridge over the Simeto and put one company between there and the sea. (Quoted in D'Este 1988: 356)

Schmidt ordered Hauptmann Otto Laun to move his battalion to Primosole Bridge while Schmidt went to Lentini and made contact with Heilmann. Laun deployed 2km south of the bridge in well-concealed positions on the edge of an orange grove to the west of the main road, ominously positioned to interdict the Allied airdrop.

On Tuesday 13 July 1943 at 2000hrs 145 Allied aircraft from Africa – 113 carrying paratroopers, plus a further 16, each towing a Horsa glider bringing in 6-pdr anti-tank guns – set off for a two-hour flight to Sicily; not all arrived, however, as Allied flak damaged 17, forcing them to return to base. Then the fire from Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 1 took its toll. Leutnant Martin Pöppel, temporarily in charge of Laun's Nr. 1 Kompanie, wrote how:

At 2200 hours aircraft suddenly appear overhead and our own sentries are shouting 'German paratroopers!' We know that reinforcements should be landed or making a drop some time. But shit! Shit! – when the signal flares light up the eerie darkness – we can see yellow and red parachutes. In an instant we realise what is going on! British airborne troops overhead.

Four big American transport planes, Douglas type, crash to the ground in flames, and three gliders are set on fire ... the fields are full of burning straw lighting the battlefield, and cones of machine gun fire cut through the darkness with their trajectory. (Pöppel 2000: 122)

Here a Horsa glider had a soft landing on Sicily, but others did not. Lathbury watched as one passed 'over our heads at about one hundred feet: it was clearly visible in the light of the fires and every German machine gun and light flak gun turned on it ... We could see about five streams of tracer going through the fuselage, then it disappeared into the darkness and a moment later we heard it hit the ground with a crash' (quoted in Wilhelmsmayer 1985a: 74). (IWM NA 5543)



The final fraught approach to the DZs (drop zones) was described by Lt Stainforth of 1st Parachute Squadron, RE:

The plane suddenly rocked and quivered ... Crash! Crash! Tiny particles of steel pattered against the fuselage. Two 88mm shells had burst above and behind our tail ... Our world suddenly turned upside down and then blew up with a roar, opening a yawning chasm beneath our feet...my batman hit me on the thigh as the signal to jump. The next moment I was dazed by the blast of the slipstream and plunged downwards with the air buffeting my face. (Quoted in Wilhelmsmayer 1985a: 72)

The approach to the DZs was at 500ft, but some men dropped from as low as 300ft. Pte Moore, a Vickers-gunner of 1st Parachute Battalion's HQ Company, wrote how he hit the ground 'quite hard and as I looked up I could see the telltale trail of tracer bullets, curving upwards toward the remainder of the stick, who were still suspended in mid-air ... two of my rigging lines had been severed, presumably by these selfsame tracer bullets' (PA). L/Cpl Albert Osborne, also of 1st Parachute Battalion's HQ Company, later wrote to his brother how 'it was just like jumping into an inferno, the country side for miles was ablaze, tracer bullets were coming up at us from enemy machine guns on the ground'; as an anti-tank gunner he had dropped with only a couple of grenades – he 'found a weapons container but as the parachute of the container failed to open and crashed to the ground, the weapons were absolutely unserviceable' (PA). He later stumbled across a Bren and a couple of rifles, with which he equipped his men.

Jock Gammon, the intelligence officer of 1st Parachute Battalion, told how from the doorway of the Dakota he could see the shape of the bridge and surrounding terrain and was reminded of the model that had been made from aerial photographs showing enemy locations. (The defensive positions of Pöppel's newly arrived unit had not been plotted and now the Airborne experienced the full effect of this omission.) Gammon's pilot swerved to avoid incoming machine-gun fire and when he jumped he heard the roar of guns and small-arms fire from down below.

Brigadier Lathbury was concerned that disaster loomed as 'it was obvious that things had gone wrong. Only a very small part of Brigade Headquarters had arrived and most of the wireless sets had gone astray; one having fallen in the river. There were no communication with any of the battalions and no-one knew what had happened' (quoted in Wilhelmsmayer 1985a: 74). The results were potentially catastrophic. In total only 30 planes dropped their men on the correct DZs and nine dropped their men nearby, but 48 were way off the mark – from half a mile to 20 miles away. Of a total of 1,856 men, only 295 would be available for the battle. Pathfinders to guide in aircraft had been used but none arrived over the DZs before the main force.

The fate of the gliders, due to land at 0100 on Wednesday 14 July, was no less bad. One troop of 1st Air Landing Battery, Royal Artillery, with six



guns was due to land on LA 7 (landing zone 7) and a second troop with four guns on LA 8. However, German fire persuaded many Allied pilots to unhook their gliders early. Of the 16 gliders, seven landed on the Catania plain but nowhere near their intended destination, and only four arrived on the correct landing zone – with two of them crash-landing close to the bridge. The after-action report of 1st Air Landing Battery complained that in the landing zone there were ‘several rows of telegraph cables inside and parallel with the road that were not reported on Intelligence Reports’ (PA), which meant only three guns were recoverable.

On the positive side for the Allies, the reluctance of most Italians to fight soon became apparent. Moore described how on the way to the bridge ‘we encountered a number of Italian troops, some with suitcases and all eager to surrender. Leaving them protesting bitterly, we proceeded on our bearing’ (PA).

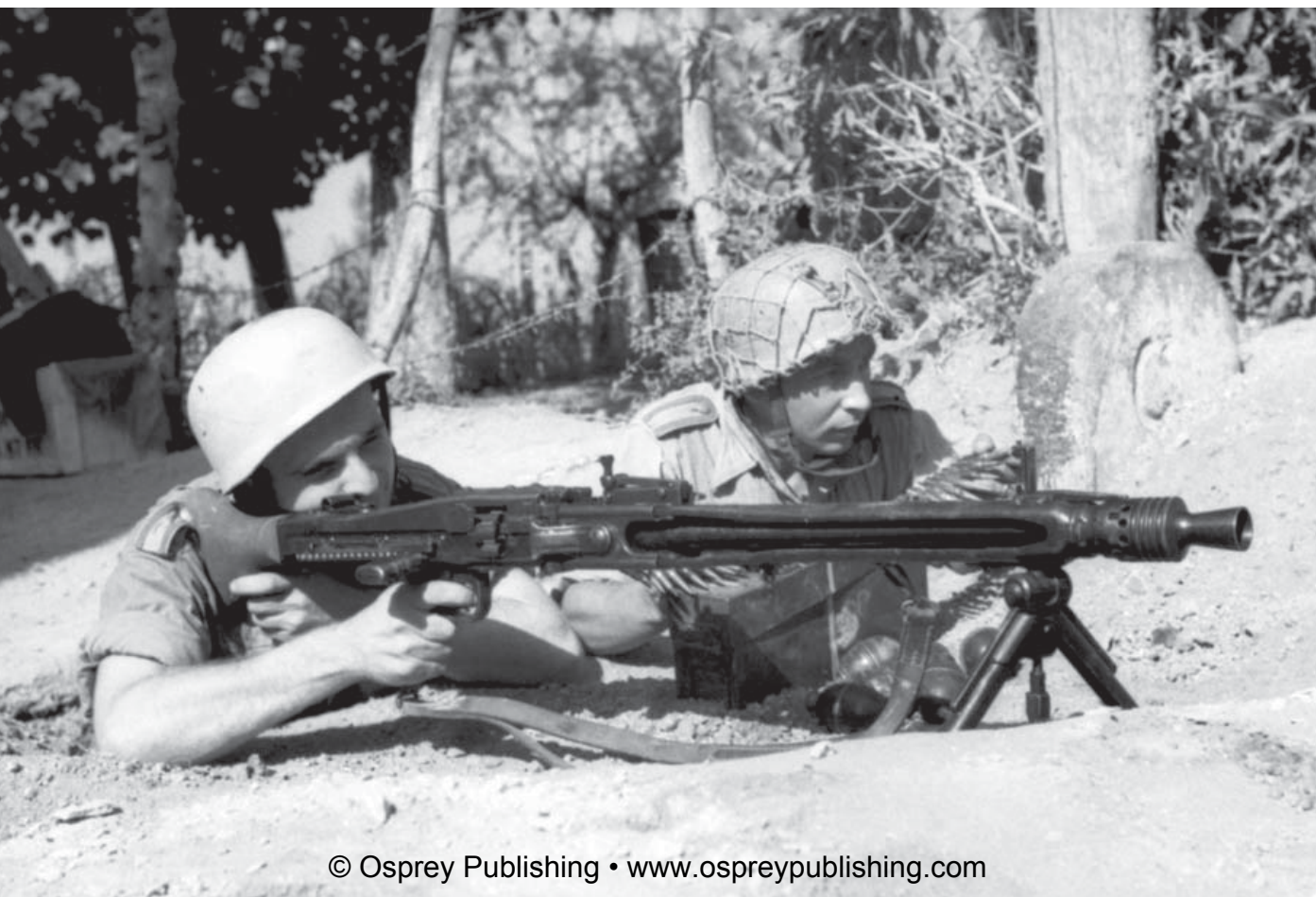
The garrisons of the pillboxes at the northern end of the bridge fled after two gliders crashed close by. On the southern side, pictured here, Lt R. Bingley, OC No. 5 Platoon, S Company, 1st Parachute Battalion, recalled how ‘a gammon bomb at one of the Pill Boxes ... resulted in some 18 Italians pouring from the Pill Boxes to surrender’ (Paradata.org).

(IWM NA 5281)

A Fallschirmjäger machine-gun team pictured on Sicily in July 1943. Pöppel described the almost relaxed situation after debussing south of Primosole Bridge: 'Allocate the sites quickly ... We have to be as quick as possible, because they're expecting fighters here as well ... Everyone's encamped under the olive trees, cleaning weapons and equipment, doing a fry-up or just basking in the sun' (Pöppel 2000: 121). (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-570-1612-20, Foto: Haas)

Despite the botched drop, at 0215 Capt Rann and 50 paratroopers of 1st Parachute Battalion captured Primosole Bridge from a small Italian guard force. Undirected movements by various German elements were also swiftly dealt with. Osborne told how at 0345 'a small tank, followed by an armoured car and a truck loaded with ammo of the enemy, came down the road ... one of the lads fired a paratroop anti-tank gun at the tank, and two gammon bombs were thrown at the other two vehicles. These are deadly weapons and smashed them to bits' (PA). At 0500, when Lathbury approached the bridge, he encountered a German 8.8cm gun being towed across the bridge by a truck, its crew oblivious to the presence of paratroopers; after being fired on the Germans abandoned the vehicle and threw a grenade, which wounded him. Meanwhile, a Royal Engineers section pulled down all the demolition charges and communication lines and a sapper told Lathbury the Germans would need to hold the bridge for four hours to lay new ones. Only two No. 22 radio sets were found intact in their containers – 1st Parachute Battalion had one and at 0930 contacted 4th Armoured Brigade to report the bridge had been captured intact, but an hour later their link was lost. No radio contact was made between the brigade's units, which meant that runners and observation had to be relied upon instead.

The bridge was easily captured; the problem would be holding on until relief arrived. At 0530 Pearson took charge of the defences. The Brigade war diary noted how a not inconsiderable force of 120 men from 1st Parachute



Battalion with three 3in mortars, three PIATs and one Vickers gun, plus two platoons from 3rd Parachute Battalion, was available. The war diary of 1st Airlanding Anti-Tank Battery reported that one 6-pdr AT gun had been dragged into position; another two were usable near Johnny I, one of the Paras' objectives. Maj David Hunter, the brigade major, also secured two Italian 50mm guns and a German 7.5cm piece, which he brought in with a captured lorry, along with some Teller mines he found in the southern blockhouse. Osborne was asked to man one of them and, instructed by the battery's 2/Lt E. Clapham, met with some success:

We were in position with this gun for about half an hour, when our Officer saw German lorries loaded up with infantry. We loaded up the gun and let them have four shells and it shook them up, and forced them to get off the lorries, so of course they had to come to us by foot. The gun wasn't much further use, so I returned back with my men to my original position, a pill box, I took a Bren gun. (PA)

Meanwhile south-west of the bridge A Company and part of HQ Company of 2nd Parachute Battalion, flown in by one of the better American squadrons, had dropped with more precision, but no Vickers or PIATs were to hand. Lt Tony Frank, commanding A Company's No. 1 Platoon, collected five men and gathered 22 more from B Company; with them, he assaulted Johnny I at 0315, capturing 130 Italians. By 0400 Frost arrived with all he could muster and by 0500 Johnny I and II were secured by the 140 men now available to him. Frost realized he had been fortunate – the Germans 'remained on the low ground during the night', which 'allowed us to forestall them' (Frost 1980: 180). If the hills were lost then Pearson would be surrounded and his position untenable.

When dawn came (at about 0550) the sun glowed off Mount Etna in the distance, promising another hot and humid day ahead. In Catania Hauptmann Stangenberg received a report from a dispatch-rider that the bridge was in enemy hands and decided to take a look himself with a small group of 20 men in two trucks; he debussed 2.5km from the bridge and was fired on when he approached down the road (conceivably by Osborne's gun). He returned to Catania to gather reinforcements and gathered around 200 clerks, cooks, mechanics and drivers from 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division's advance party, which he commanded. Stangenberg obtained permission from Heidrich in Rome to use Hauptmann Erich Fassl's Nachrichten-Kompanie Nr. 1 (150 men), which had arrived the previous afternoon in three Ju 52 and an Me 323 in order to 'establish communication links by constructing a command system for the Divisional staff and troops' (Wilhelmsmayer 1985b: 71), and improvised artillery support from an AAA unit – equipped with one 8.8cm German and one 50mm Italian piece – by laying a landline to their command post. There were also two 8.8cm guns posted on the airfield he could call upon.

Frederick Moore, 1st Parachute Battalion

Frederick Moore volunteered for Commando training 'spurred by the rumour of extra pay and the luxury of exchanging life in army barracks for the comfort of civvy billets', and in 1941 'after a series of night and day plane jumps, seven in all, we were presented with our coveted parachute badge' (PA). Training emphasized 'physical fitness, endurance and efficiency in all known aspects of guerrilla warfare' (PA). He described how after one exercise at Exford, Devon, 'we marched back, with full pack, to Bulford, a distance of 110 miles, in just over three days' (PA), making nightly detours to local pubs.

Moore participated in Operation *Torch* with 1st Parachute Battalion, and was assigned to a new platoon commander as his batman for the Primosole operation. He participated in the assault on the bridge but was soon wounded by a grenade. In September 1944 he dropped into the Netherlands as a member of a Vickers team of 1st Parachute Battalion in Operation *Market Garden*, an undertaking that seemed a formality compared to 'the memory of the fiercely opposed night-time landing to capture the Primosole Bridge in Sicily' (PA). However, he was soon better informed. Eventually he was wounded by shellfire, captured and taken to Stalag XIB at Fallingbomel, where he spent the remainder of the war.

At midday these guns started to bombard the British positions around the bridge. Osborne described how the Germans 'shelled us with a long range overhead shrapnel gun. This wasn't nice at all' (PA) – the shells were bursting 20–30ft in the air. British casualties mounted in the face of this concentration. The more lightly wounded, like Pte Moore, had to walk; he recalled that the medical orderly had 'given me a shot of morphine, I was directed to join the growing band of wounded, some distance along the riverbank, amid the tall, abundant reeds' (PA).

At 1310, covered by smoke, the German attack commenced with Stangenberg's group on the right and then Fassl's signallers on the left, assisted by the artillery support. Osborne described the rash approach of one party, which may have indicated the lack of tactical awareness of rear-echelon troops, despite his observations; this group 'came closer and closer until he was at a nice range for us to fire, so away we blazed again, but these men are fools and trusted to go at you with no fear, that puts the wind up most troops, but we had met these birds before in N. Africa' (PA). Despite the naivety of the approach, Stangenberg, the former commander of Nr. 6 Kompanie of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1 in May 1940, maintained the firefight. As a consequence Osborne wrote how 'our ammo was almost finished' (PA), which prompted Pearson to concentrate around the northern end of the bridge.

Laun's response to 2nd Parachute Battalion's landing had been more immediate. Pöppel described how 'at 0500 hours 3 and 4 companies each send a reconnaissance patrol into the countryside ahead ... Meanwhile we provide cover with our heavy machine guns' (Pöppel 2000: 123). Johnny II was quickly recaptured by the Germans and at 0630 a German mortar bombardment commenced, prior to a planned assault on Johnny I. Frost recalled that 'their mortar fire was all the more deadly on the rocky ground' (Frost 1980: 180). Awarded the Military Medal for rescuing a wounded German, Cpl Neville Ashley from A Company's No. 2 Platoon actually moved his Bren forward to better engage an approaching *Fallschirmjäger* machine-gun crew, while Lt Peter Barry, OC

No. 9 Platoon, C Company, led a patrol to tackle a German machine-gun post beyond Bren range. These efforts forestalled an impending attack on Johnny I, but by 0800 the troops there had been forced to withdraw into a tight perimeter. Frost reported how he regretted the lack of Vickers and 3in mortars; the British could not reply to the Germans' long-range machine guns and mortars as they were 'not within the range of our Brens' (Frost 1980: 181).

Then Capt Vere Hodge, the forward observation officer for the air-landed 6-pdrs, contacted the cruiser HMS *Newfoundland* with the other No. 22 radio found intact. At 0900, he brought down indirect fire from the ship's 6in guns on German machine-gun positions within 400yd of the British lines. Laun was put off advancing again in case naval firepower support again targeted his men and 'what seemed like imminent defeat was staved off and from then on the danger receded' (Frost 1980: 181). He did not know the radio link had been lost and would not be regained until mid-afternoon. His understandable trepidation and the ability of 2nd Parachute Battalion to stand firm, despite a high volume of incoming mortar and machine gun fire, guaranteed the continued British possession of Johnny I.

The situation at Johnny I mitigated concerns Pearson had for his southern flank. However, although communications with HMS *Newfoundland* was re-established by about 1500, using naval gunfire against Stangenberg's men proved to be problematic as 'it was difficult to see the attacking enemy infantry because there was a considerable amount of cover leading right up to the bridge in the shape of trees, bushes and undergrowth' (Frost 1980: 182). However, a German battery targeting the bridge was located and its command post and ammunition dump destroyed.

At the bridge Pearson was concerned about a shortage of ammunition, but was everywhere, pointing out targets and judging for himself the tactical situation rather than relying on his junior officers to inform him. Here, another German bombardment started at 1500 and the 3rd Parachute Battalion war diary reported how four truckloads of reinforcements appeared. At 1600, supported by artillery fire against the bridge and the south bank,

Martin Pöppel, Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 1

In 1938 Pöppel read an article about the new airborne arm, and – because service was for two years rather than the four required by the German Navy, the Kriegsmarine – he applied, aged 18. At 1.72m (5ft 7½in) he 'felt puny beside the rest' but he was a good shot because he had 'been something of a marksman during my days in the Hitler Youth' (Pöppel 2000: 10) and could achieve 34 out of 36 rings at 100m (109yd) in the prone position. After qualification he joined Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1 and was posted to the regimental signals platoon.

In May 1940 he won the Iron Cross both 1st and 2nd class in the Netherlands, the only *Oberjäger* to be awarded both. He was transferred to Nr. 2 Kompanie/Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Bataillon 7, survived the drop on Crete, was promoted *Feldwebel* and served at a training establishment before being commissioned as a *Leutnant* in December 1941, serving in Russia before the move to Sicily. After Sicily he was wounded but recovered and joined Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6 in Normandy; he survived to be captured by the British on 26 March 1945, and wrote his memoirs after the war.

Stangenberg and Fassl commenced their second attack at the north bank, which, according to the 3rd Parachute Battalion war diary, was held 'but only just'; however, another attack was soon 'pressed with renewed vigour', and at 1730 Lathbury ordered Pearson to evacuate the northern bank.

On the south bank the remaining Airborne soldiers, still covering the bridge with fire and hoping British tanks would soon appear, took what cover they could among the reeds. Stangenberg realised the importance of recapturing the bridge before this could happen and attempted to push across. When ammunition for his Vickers ran out, Sgt Douglas-Kerr switched to a captured MG 42 and pushed them back, which earned him a Military Medal. Sgt J.G. Anderson with his 6-pdr gun was in position south of the river; the battery's war diary reported that when the withdrawal was under way 'he engaged the enemy occupied pill box north and silenced the fire coming from it'. However, there was no answering the Germans when, Osborne recalled, they 'brought up a short range direct hit, pill-box buster [probably a Sturmgeschütz assault gun under Schmalz's command], and he just lined them up on our pill-boxes one after the other, and he blew them flat to the ground. Some men escaped from the blast' (PA).

Still, rather than cross the bridge in force, Stangenberg wisely decided to try to prise the British from their new positions and at 1830 *Fallschirmjäger* crossed the river 400yd downstream. At 1915, with his

When the withdrawal to the south bank – pictured here – was made, 'the Germans were able to bring assault guns with which they pulverised the blockhouse and other defences controlling the bridge' (Frost 1980: 183). When on 16 July Shermans attempted to cross to retake the bridge, three were destroyed by an 8.8cm gun firing down the road. (IWM NA 4779)





positions about to be outflanked and having received a message from 4th Armoured Brigade suggesting no relief would be forthcoming, Lathbury ordered a withdrawal. The remaining paratroopers were split up into small parties and told to make their way south to Johnny I, where he knew 2nd Parachute Battalion was still holding out; the sun set at 2020. Osborne later told how 'a lot of us got away, but some were forced to stay as they couldn't get away, but they did a good job, with what little ammo they had, by sniping' (PA).

The British relieving force's advance elements were only 1½ miles away. Of the 295 men who had defended the bridge (including stragglers that had come in during the day), 27 had been killed and 75 wounded. South-west of the bridge the situation could not have been more different. Pöppel thought his unit could be 'completely trapped by British forces advancing from the south' and was relieved when, at 1930, Laun also gave the order to withdraw to the river (Pöppel 2000: 124).

Here in Tunisia a paratrooper Bren gunner, relying on the accuracy of his weapon rather than volume of fire, is providing fire from behind cover. The Bren's design emphasised precision and ease of carriage rather than volume of fire. At Primosole Bridge the British paratroopers' Brens were outmatched by their belt-fed German equivalents. Frost reported how he could not reply to the Germans' long-range machine guns and mortars as they were 'not within the range of our Brens' (Frost 1980: 181). (Cody Images)



SHUMATE
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Withdrawal from the bridge

Here Lt-Col Pearson on the southern bank is directing Sgt Douglas Kerr, firing his captured MG 42 at *Fallschirmjäger* gathering near the bridge. Cpl Stanley Tynan of No. 16 Parachute Field Ambulance is tending to a wounded paratrooper who has recently crossed over from the northern bank. Throughout the day 72 wounded men would be patched up at a dressing station established in a farmhouse half a mile south-east of the bridge. A mule and farm cart provided their transport. (Cpl Tynan would win the Military Medal for his efforts evacuating them under heavy fire).

L/Cpl Albert Osborne is seen exiting a pillbox; he later described how he had been giving 'the wounded men cover

over the bridge with my Bren gun, and I was hoping that these chaps would get a move on so that I could give the order to evacuate the pill-box. When they were all over and safe, I knew it was time to get out of that death trap' (PA).

Osborne had seen a German assault gun moving into a firing position 'so I gave the order for my men to go, and we got out and took up a new position along the high bank' — none too soon, because 'five or six minutes later we saw our pill-box get smashed to the ground, all we were depending on then was one machine gun, as all the others were knocked out of position. We did our best and crawled to a good position' (PA).

Elsewhere, the relief operation had started off well. At 2200 on 13 July Durnford-Slater's No. 3 Commando landed by sea and took Malati Bridge intact by 0300 on 14 July. 69th Infantry Brigade advanced north during the day but the Commandos were forced to abandon their prize before they arrived. Fortunately for the British the Germans failed to destroy the crossing and 9th DLI (151st Infantry Brigade), along with Shermans from 4th Armoured Brigade's 44th RTR, took over and drove across at 1700. At 1915, the same time as Lathbury ordered the withdrawal from Primosole Bridge, Frost at Johnny I observed how 'a troop of Shermans ... rumbled down the road' (Frost 1980: 184). However, after covering 20 miles that day 9th DLI was in no condition to assault the bridge that evening. Brigadier R.H. Senior, OC 151st Infantry Brigade, took the decision — as he was without artillery support — to wait until the following morning to make an attack. Only at the insistence of Frost's Intelligence Officer, Lt Francis Hoyer-Millar, was one company sent forward to reinforce Johnny I, at 2340.

At first, Stangenberg mistook the DLI for Heilmann's 900 men. However, Heilmann had been bypassed because he had refused to obey a retreat order from Schmalz, and was forced to opt for cross-country movement on foot at night to attempt to regain German lines. Stangenberg's disappointment was short-lived as Nr. 1 and Nr. 3 Kompanien of Hauptmann Heinz Paul Adolff's Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 1, who had parachuted over Catania that evening, took over primary responsibility for defending the southern end of the bridge (Nr. 2 Kompanie was in reserve on the northern bank). He sent back Fassl's company to guard Catania harbour because the Italians manning the 30cm coastal guns had deserted.

At 0730 on 15 July, as the Airborne embarked on trucks to take them to Syracuse to board a ship for North Africa, a doomed attack towards the bridge by 9th DLI supported by 44th RTR was under way. Frost described how 'the Germans held their fire until the Durhams were within 50 yds ... then mowed the leading platoons down' (Frost 1980: 184). Pearson volunteered to lead a

night attack across a less well-defended fordable section of the river 400yd further upstream. At 0100 on Friday 16 July, after a 60-minute bombardment, A and D Companies of 8th DLI secured a foothold. At dawn, B and C Companies of 8th DLI with tank support assaulted across the bridge and established a small bridgehead.

At 0105 on Saturday 17 July, 6th and 9th DLI crossed the river and advanced into the vineyards for a final tenacious fight. At 0630 the *Fallschirm-Pioniere* counter-attacked and stopped any further British advance, but after



British accounts were full of admiration for the *Fallschirmjäger*. *The Times* of London described them as 'fantastically courageous, to fight against them was an education for any soldier', while Kirkman wrote that 'it was impossible not to admire the fanatical courage with which they fought' and the DLI history asserted that 'there can have been few better troops in Sicily' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 396). (Cody Images)

three hours of combat were left decimated. Adolff personally led a last desperate attempt to destroy the bridge with a truck full of explosives, but his mission failed. He was posthumously promoted and awarded the Knight's Cross. Fassl, having received no orders to withdraw, held on until a tank overran his foxhole. Only 17 men of his unit remained effective. The remaining Germans withdrew to the Fosso Bottaceto and were reinforced that evening by recently arrived elements of Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 4 and Heilmann's two battalions. According to the British (but disputed by German sources) 300 Germans lay dead and 155 were taken prisoner. In three days 151st Infantry Brigade had advanced 1,000yd and suffered 500 casualties.

Montgomery put on a brave face, as he would after Operation *Market Garden*. Osborne told how he 'came to see us and thanked us for another good job' (PA). Lathbury was more critical, bemoaning the reluctance of 44th RTR to make a night attack on the bridge on 14 July. Another three weeks would pass before Catania fell, on 5 August. With the drive on Messina stalled, the Germans brought across sufficient reinforcements to guarantee an unimpeded, orderly evacuation.

Analysis & Conclusion

Before assessing their performance it would be worth looking at how the paratroopers of each side viewed each other. Frost was full of praise for his adversary: near Oudna, he recalled, 'on two occasions I felt bound to leave part of my fighting strength to protect our wounded, but in the event our German opponents turned out to be of the parachute fraternity and they took considerable trouble to look after our men whenever they could' (Frost 1980: 102), a view confirmed by Oberstleutnant Koch's actions at Depienne. Frost thought German weapon-handling was superior: 'time and again they got into action first, and while our men were still groping for good fire positions, the opposing gun numbers would bring long and accurate bursts to bear' (Frost 1980: 90).

German views of their British counterparts were mixed; Witzig wrote how 'it was a surprise for us to meet such decent soldiers and human beings and it reduced our feelings of hate' (quoted in Villahermosa 2010: 160). However, Leutnant Pöppel demurred. His following detailed personal description was quite disparaging, but his opinions should be seen as typical of the way proud elite soldiers deliberately criticize their counterparts:

Certainly not eager to fight and their equipment looks fairly pathetic ... The [Sten] guns look pathetic, reminding us of Russian weapons ... Physically these are medium sized, good-looking fellows, some of whom have already fought in North Africa while others are direct from Britain. In my opinion their spirit is none too good. They tend to surrender as soon as they face the slightest resistance, in a way that none of our men would have done. (Pöppel 2000: 123)

A photograph taken directly after the Depienne operation showing 2nd Parachute Battalion officers in thoughtful contemplation. Understandably many would have shared Frost's view; his reaction 'to having my battalion cut to pieces on such a useless venture was astonishment' (Frost 1980: 102). (IWM NA 351)



LESSONS LEARNED – THE BRITISH

On 15 July 1943 Allied airborne operations were suspended pending an investigation – other US and British operations, particularly 1st Airlanding Brigade's at Ponte Grande, had resulted in horrendous losses. Frost thought the Primosole operation 'another humiliating disaster for airborne forces and almost enough to destroy even the most ardent believer's faith' (Frost 1980: 185). Eisenhower stated, 'I do not believe in the airborne division. I believe that airborne troops should be organized in self-contained units, comprising infantry, artillery and special services, all of about the strength of a regimental combat team' (PA). Maj-Gen G.F. Hopkinson drew up plans to break up his 1st Airborne Division into mixed parachute and glider brigade groups; only a successful American drop on New Guinea in September 1943 changed Eisenhower's opinion and led to the abandonment of Hopkinson's scheme.

At Primosole, despite the fact that so few British paratroopers were available, the bridge could have been held. However, relatively junior German officers – Stangenberg and Fassl – acting on their own initiative gathered what resources were to hand and succeeded in recapturing the structure before relief arrived. British Bren guns were no match for German machine guns; their heavier Vickers guns were difficult to move and lack of ammunition made sustaining fire difficult. Although naval gunfire was crucial to preserving Frost's position, the terrain north of the bridge may have led to targeting problems. In addition, Allied close air support was completely absent, but then using them against well-concealed German positions in the vineyards and gullies would have been dangerous with British troops so close.

The faults at Primosole lay at the strategic and operational levels. Against ordinary opposition Catania perhaps could have been taken, but with the deployment of *Fallschirmjäger*, especially the well-equipped machine-gun and *Fallschirm-Pionier* battalions, too much was expected. The achievements of



In North Africa and Sicily the fighting qualities of the British paratroopers had been proved by their engagements with their German adversaries. In North West Europe in 1944 they went from strength to strength and conducted divisional-size drops from Dakotas on D-Day, in the Netherlands and during the Rhine crossing. Paratroopers from 12th Parachute Battalion are seen here after spending three days behind enemy lines in Normandy, 9 June 1944. (Cody Images)

the British paratroopers in holding the bridge for so long is testament to their morale and ethos; lacking ammunition and cover, and with their flank turned, little else could be expected of them.

Depienne represents an even greater tactical achievement for the British because the paratroopers sustained their resolution behind enemy lines for over five days; any other unit might well have disintegrated. The Depienne operation was based on false assumptions from the start, which the intelligence-collection plan was not robust enough to challenge. Overall it is difficult to disagree with Frost's view that 'the British Army had no idea of how or when the new airborne capability should be used and our own Brigade HQ set-up was woefully inadequate to ensure that really dreadful errors should not occur' (Frost 1980: 103); their learning curve was too steep and would cost the paratroopers dear.

The use of paratroopers as assault troops proved more beneficial, but at Green Hill planning blunders and the quality of the opponent again resulted in failure. 3rd Parachute Battalion's after-action report criticized 'the splitting of the battalion ... [as] an absurdity': C Company was left behind to remain fresh for an assault on Bald Hill the next day. If the whole of the battalion had been deployed, the report concluded, 'there is no doubt that the hill would have been captured and held' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 310) – a reasonable view that is difficult to argue with. However, while it was already dark, the report's assertions – that 'nothing could be pointed out on the ground' and B Company was 'thrown into the battle at night at a strange objective and at short notice' with no reconnaissance possible because orders were hastily given – are difficult to accept.

B Company's performance was rightly praised in the battalion report; however, the strength of the defensive positions was 'seriously underestimated and too much reliance was placed on the effect of heavy artillery fire on

In his diary Montgomery blamed the Primosole failure on the *Fallschirmjäger*, writing how the Germans were 'dropping small parties of very stout hearted parachute troops in order to stiffen up his weak places' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 401). The determination with which the *Fallschirmjäger* matched their adversaries was exemplified when a captured German officer in civilian clothes was told he could be shot – he replied 'that is quite understood. I took the risk' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 398). (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-788-0009-13A, Foto: Wörner)



prepared positions' (quoted in Cherry 2011: 310). The assault showed that appreciating the scale of the task and basing it upon accurate intelligence was as relevant at the tactical level as it was at the operational and strategic.

By 1944 the delivery of British paratroopers was much improved. However, the policy of letting the RAF decide on the location of DZs hampered 1st Airborne Division's drop in the Netherlands, as fully 7 miles separated them from their objective; other factors – over-ambitious assumptions about the progress of the ground offensive and the Airborne's ability to deal with tanks – combined to decimate the division, which the heroism of the ordinary paratrooper could not reverse.

LESSONS LEARNED – THE GERMANS

At Primosole Bridge German initiative by junior leaders had tactical consequences, which according to Fassl led to profound operational repercussions. There had been some indecision amongst the staff of Panzer-Division 'Hermann Göring' (who had operational control of *Fallschirmjäger* units) about their future prospects; after Fassl's subordinate Leutnant Uetzner reported to Stangenberg that they were considering retreating from the

River Simeto, Uetzner was sent to persuade 'them to turn round and occupy the sector' (Wilhelmsmayer 1985b: 74). Whether he had this impact or not, Fassl's following view on his subordinate's influence indicates the influence as *Fallschirmjäger* he thought they had over their less experienced comrades: 'This move was successful and the German forces in eastern Sicily formed a new frontline on the Simeto' (Wilhelmsmayer 1985b: 74).

In contrast, in North Africa Knoche's tactical reaction to Frost's occupation of Cactus Farm appears ill thought out. The Germans' failure to surround the position – particularly on the western side – was negligent and perhaps indicative of insufficient resources. Machine-gun fire was surprisingly ineffective, although mortars were making an impact by evening. The repeated probes were not strong enough to capture the farm and are incongruous considering the otherwise cautious approach adopted. Considering the lack of defensive fire the Germans may have thought initially the British were few in number, a view that Arabs may have

encouraged them to take. Taken in an operational context their actions may be better understood. Perhaps Knoche thought that although Frost's group posed a danger to his own forces operating near El Bathan (where his Nr. 12 Kompanie was relieving the platoon of *Fallschirm-Pioniere* that had captured the bridge over the River Medjerda) it was sufficient to neutralize rather than to destroy them.

Turning to operational leadership, there were faults. On Sicily, Heilmann failed to obey Schmalz's withdrawal order, telling him 'wherever German paratroopers are, there will be no retreat' (quoted in D'Este 1988: 378). Heidrich erroneously believed Schmalz had abandoned Heilmann and tried, in vain, to bring Heilmann's regiment back under the operational control of 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division. In North Africa there were some problems, too. Despite appreciating their resilience and expertise, Witzig bemoaned the use of his *Fallschirm-Pioniere* as infantry. However, after deploying to Tunisia, the part played by Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5 was faultless. Koch pushed the cordon as far forward as he could before withdrawing at the right time to link up with armoured reinforcements disembarking at Tunis. During the Tebourba operation he played his part and at Cactus Farm Knoche acted within the operational framework.

Strategically, the successful deployment of the German *Fallschirmjäger* to North Africa and Sicily vindicated their continued use as a rapidly deployable reserve and justified their expansion to ten divisions by the end of the war. *Fallschirmjäger* were used as elite 'fire brigade' units to plug gaps in the line or defend particularly important sections of the front; 1. Fallschirmjäger-Division is best known for its tenacious grip on Monte Cassino in Italy, with 2. Fallschirmjäger-Division doing a similar job around Saint-Lô in Normandy. Future airborne drops were extremely rare and small-scale, but were conducted for strategic effect, with mixed results.



German paratroopers continued to prove their use in high-risk airborne operations carried out for strategic effect. Here paratroopers celebrate their successful mission to rescue Mussolini from Gran Sasso on 12 September 1943, after being delivered by glider. (Cody Images)

UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

British parachute battalion, late 1942

The British parachute battalion (25 officers and 588 men) consisted of a battalion HQ, an HQ company and three rifle companies. There were five officers (CO, 2ic, adjutant, deputy adjutant and medical officer) and 22 men in the battalion HQ.

The HQ company (five officers and 164 men) comprised a company HQ (one officer and ten men), intelligence section (one officer and ten men), signals platoon (one officer and 26 men with eight airborne bicycles), mortar platoon (one officer and 36 men with four 3in mortars), security section (six men armed with two Brens and a Boys ATR), and an administrative and support platoon (one officer and 76 men, including motor pool; this platoon was not taken into action). A medium machine-gun platoon, with one officer and 36 men armed with eight Vickers MMGs organized into two platoons, was added in time for the Sicilian landings, but was not present in North Africa.

Each rifle company (five officers and 134 men), commanded by a major with a captain as his second-in-command, had a company HQ (two officers and 12 men), three rifle platoons, a mortar section (16 men with two 3in mortars) and an anti-tank section (seven men with two Boys ATRs).

Each rifle platoon (one officer and 33 men) had a platoon HQ consisting of a lieutenant or 2nd lieutenant, sergeant, batman (carrying the radio) and runner, and three rifle sections, each of ten men. The officer was provided with a pistol and the sergeant with a Sten; the two men each had a rifle. (Each platoon could also carry a Boys ATR.)

Each ten-man rifle section was led by a Sten-armed sergeant (as opposed to the line infantry's employment of corporals as section-leaders); it included a three-man gun group crewing both a Bren and a 2in airborne mortar, and a rifle group of six privates armed with rifles or Stens. (There was a pool of 429 Sten guns available to each battalion, which replaced the rifle according to the CO's direction.)

German Fallschirm-Pionier-Bataillon 11, late 1942

In late 1942, Witzig's battalion was organized into a *Stabs-Kompanie* (Braun), a *Nachrichten-Zug* (Heise) and four *Fallschirm-Pionier-Kompanien* (1. Ernst; 2. Tietjen; 3. Friedrich; 4. Hart), plus a light parachute engineer column. Each *Fallschirm-Pionier-Kompanie* included a medium-machine-gun section of eight men armed with two MG 42s mounted on tripods. Villahermosa notes that although the authorized strength was 716 all ranks, equipped 'with 36 LMGs, eight MMGs, 12 ATRs and 12 flamethrowers ... in late 1942 there were only 572 men in the ranks, including 14 officers, 115 NCOs, and 443 enlisted men' (Villahermosa 2010: 144).

Villahermosa notes that 'Each company had a headquarters section, three platoons and a medium machine gun section.

Each platoon had a headquarters with a small flamethrower and an ATR team, and three sections, each with one light machine gun' (Villahermosa 2010: 144).

German Fallschirmjäger-Regiment, late 1942–mid-1943

According to the 1943 regulations, the *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment* included one unnumbered company (*Stabskompanie*) and 14 numbered companies; each company was commanded by either an *Oberleutnant* or a *Leutnant*. The first 12 numbered companies were organized into three rifle battalions (I., II. and III.), each commanded by a *Major* or a *Hauptmann*; each battalion had three *Jäger-Kompanien* and one *Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Kompanie*. Nr. 13 *Kompanie* (163 all ranks) deployed 12 heavy 12cm mortars and three LMGs, while Nr. 14. *Panzerjäger-Kompanie* (186 all ranks) deployed 14 towed 7.5cm AT guns.

The *Jäger-Kompanie* (170 all ranks) was equipped with 20 LMGs, 43 MP 40s, three ATRs and three 5cm mortars; it was organized into three *Züge* (Quarrie 2005: 34). (By July 1943 the 5cm mortars would probably have been replaced with 8.1cm mortars, with a section of two manned by 15 men allocated at company rather than platoon level.)

Each rifle *Zug*, commanded either by an *Oberfeldwebel* or by a *Leutnant* (if the first *Zug* of the company) armed with MP 40 and pistol, had an HQ section and three rifle sections. The HQ section consisted of up to one officer and six men, including a medic, two drivers with MP 40s, and three runners armed with rifles or carbines; in addition, two men manned the 5cm mortar and another two an ATR. There were three sections per rifle *Zug*, each consisting of 12 men with two LMGs (Greisser 2011: 10). The rifle section, divided into a machine-gun group and a rifle group, was commanded by an *Oberjäger*; he was assisted by an *Obergefreiter*, who normally commanded the rifle group.

The *Fallschirm-Maschinengewehr-Kompanie* (205 all ranks) manned eight heavy machine guns (tripod-mounted MG 34s or MG 42s) and four 8.1cm mortars, plus two 7.5cm IG 40 recoilless rifles.

In July 1943 *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment* 3 and 4 would have been organized on these lines; however, *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment* 5 in North Africa, set up in mid-1942, would have been different, with each rifle section having only nine men with one LMG, rather than 12 men with two LMGs. It is likely that to provide supplementary firepower, each *Jäger-Kompanie* deployed a medium-machine-gun section of eight men with two tripod-mounted MG 42s.

The regulations changed again in 1944; however, it is likely that the 1944 organization is probably applicable to 1942 and 1943 support sections – namely, a company train of 17 men equipped with 3-ton trucks and an HQ section of 12 men with two 3-ton trucks, a *Kübelwagen*, and motorcycles.

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